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THE WING

Confessions of an R.A.F. Officer

by ROM LANDAU

Each night after the day's work, Rom Landau wrote an average of a thousand words in his private R.A.F. "log book". Though not written in diary form THE WING is the fruit of those detailed daily entries and is a distillation of a day to day diary of 450,000 words. In consequence it conveys much of the intimacy and directness that are so often lost when time is allowed to exercise its distorting influence upon memory. The author has been working on this book for over four years and it is without doubt his longest but also his most intimate work so far.

After a comprehensive training in most branches of a Bomber Squadron—from Flying to Intelligence—Rom Landau became Liaison Officer with the Polish Air Force whose rebirth in Britain he watched and participated in from the beginning. He then volunteered as an air-gunner and, finally, became Air Staff Operations Officer with fighters. Thus his experiences were of a much more comprehensive character than are those of the average member of the R.A.F., and his book gives a fascinating and very personal picture of the Air Force life in a bomber squadron and among air-gunners, air battles "reflected" in the Ops. Room, meeting H.M. the King, acting as an involuntary interpreter for the Minister of Air, giving English lessons to Polish officers; and the contrast of life during the Battle of Britain on a South coast aerodrome and among the moors of Scotland.

Though THE WING naturally deals with all his service activities these provide merely the raw material for a tale the underlying theme of which is the author's spiritual development during the war. The religious and philosophical beliefs set out in his earlier books are here tried and tested, and the reader will find himself forced to think again about the moral aspect of the general struggle since 1939. At the same time he will witness the individual struggle of a man who tried to co-ordinate his spiritual beliefs with events and conditions that have revolutionized the lives of millions of his fellows.

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THE WING

Confessions
of an R.A.F. Officer

by
ROM LANDAU

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24 Russell Square
London

●

In Memory
of
my flying instructor
SQUADRON LEADER HARRY THWAITES
and my other R.A.F. friends
killed before, during, and since
the
Battle of Britain

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‘If nothing but the bright side of characters should be shown, we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in *anything*.’

‘That the writer may be justly condemned as an enemy to goodness, who suffers fondness of interest to . . . shelter the faults which even the wisest and the best have committed, from that ignominy . . . with which it should be more deeply stigmatized, when dignified by its neighbourhood to uncommon worth.’

—DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON

Book One

TRAINING A WHITE ELEPHANT

Chapter One

MANHILL

I

Still sailing on the crest of uncommon adventure, I intended not to part from my first souvenir of that adventure, even though it consisted of nothing more romantic than a free railway warrant. It was the first railway warrant I had ever possessed and the first document entitling me to certain privileges inherent in my new status. Nevertheless, by the time I reached Liverpool Street station, I resolved to abide by the laws that henceforth were to govern my existence and, consequently, I exchanged the warrant for a third-class ticket to Shipton in Suffolk, thereby saving the best part of two pounds.

As far as Cambridge I was alone in my compartment, but was then joined by a young airman. When I confessed to him with ineffectively concealed pride that I was on my way to embellish the ranks of the Royal Air Force, nothing could restrain him from initiating me into the mysteries of my future calling. At last he gave me a chance to put in a question, and I asked him about conditions at the aerodrome of Manhill. 'Ever since the war started conditions at all stations in Suffolk have been lousy,' he replied with an officious air. 'Quarters are overcrowded and you'll have to share your room with at least two other blokes.' 'What were things like before the war?' 'Wizard', and he beamed all over the face. He might have been referring to some distant past and not to a period that had ended only a few weeks previously.

When we arrived at Shipton, the train proved too long or the station platform too short. At any rate my carriage stopped well outside the actual station and above a steep bank which it was quite impossible to reach from the train. So, armed with a suitcase in each hand, I scrambled hastily through two carriages, and, just as the train was about to move again, I managed to push my load and myself through the door and on to the platform.

It was pouring hard. The aerodrome was some ten miles from the station, and I had imagined that the telegram which I had sent off the previous night to announce the hour of my arrival would bring someone to meet me. But the station was deserted and not a soul was to be seen. After a while, a youth who in his diminutive person combined the func-

tions of porter, ticket-collector, and station master spotted the solitary traveller. He emerged from his den, took charge of my belongings, and then advised me to 'phone to Manhill for transport.

The only telephone available was in the inn opposite the station. Inside the inn there were no signs of life, except for a plate of cheese and a Victorian glass bowl piled high with oranges. After debating for a while whom to ask for at Manhill, I finally decided to have a shot at the adjutant. A rather more obliging voice than I had anticipated replied, 'You want transport? I'll send it at once.' Well, my first direct contact with the R.A.F. seemed promising enough.

I was anxious to catch the transport immediately upon its arrival and, as there was no waiting-room in the railway station, I carried my suitcases to the edge of the road where I settled down to wait. It rained hard and there was a sharp east wind. Except for station and pub, no houses were visible in the surrounding bleak country of vast turnip fields.

After less than ten minutes a vehicle appeared on the horizon. Pretty fast going, I congratulated myself. But then I had always thought of the Royal Air Force in no other terms but those of exemplary efficiency. Unfortunately I had rejoiced too soon. The vehicle proved to be a rambling old lorry laden with turnips. After a further five minutes another lorry appeared, this time with a load of pigs. Then for about ten minutes nothing happened. Meanwhile the wind had become a gale and the rain a downpour. Though my calling-up papers stipulated distinctly that I should present myself in civilian clothes, I had not dared to appear in an aerodrome with an umbrella, and had left that useful implement at home. My feet were getting colder every minute and the tickle in throat and nose was the unmistakable herald of things to come. Of the two lorries that passed within the next five minutes, one again was carrying turnips and the other pigs. When a few minutes later a private car appeared, I was certain that my vigil had reached its end, but the car proved to be a dilapidated Ford with a small trailer behind, in which a huge airedale lay asleep on a heap of turnips.

I had arrived at Shipton soon after 10 a.m. and meanwhile eleven had struck. The desolation of the landscape, at times half-hidden behind a curtain of slanting rain, gradually replaced my earlier elation with a funereal sense of frustration. For a couple of minutes my melancholy was relieved by the spectacle of a goods train trundling along, each of its thirty-eight trucks filled with turnips. Suddenly I caught myself developing a violent anti-turnip complex, and when after a further period of unbroken stillness a horse-driven cart arrived filled with celery, the white stalks blackened by mud, I felt a sense of relief amounting almost to gratitude.

At eleven-twenty a huge air force blue truck approached the pub. In the meantime I had become indifferent to my fate, and my mental line of demarcation between an aerodrome and turnip fields had become fluid, but I couldn't help noticing the gigantic wheels of the vehicle and reflecting that it seemed an overdose of goodwill to dispatch a six-ton truck for

the sake of one solitary pilot officer, not yet in uniform. But since my throat was by now showing every known symptom of flu and I was shivering all over, I felt grateful to find myself relieved from what must have been the draughtiest vigil in the whole county of Suffolk.

To my surprise the driver neither saluted me nor took any notice of my presence. So I accosted him and explained that I was 'the' officer whom he had come to collect. 'I know nothing about you, sir, but I don't mind taking you to Manhill,' he replied. 'But if you want to come with me you must wait till the twelve o'clock train from London is in. I've orders to meet it.' Resigned, I placed my suitcases inside the truck and crept into the driver's cabin to wait.

Only one more lorry-load of pigs came along the road before the twelve o'clock train moved into the station. Not a single airman alighted from it, so a few minutes later we drove off in the direction of Manhill.

I had left Sussex two days previously in brilliant sunshine. 'Has it been raining here for long?' I asked the driver of the six-ton truck which carried two wet suitcases and one shivering not-yet-P.O. 'Over a week.' 'And no sunshine?' 'We don't get much sunshine here, sir.' 'Is it always so cold?' 'The Fen country's always cold. These 'ere fields are under water most of the year.' 'What about the living quarters at the aerodrome?' 'They aren't under water, but they're damp, always damp.'

When we reached the aerodrome my spirits rose again. The huge hangars on the left of the road gave me a new sense of excitement, and made me feel that I was approaching adventure hitherto secret and even mysterious to the lifelong civilian. On the right was the officers' mess, an attractive-looking building separated from the road by a formal garden and two tennis courts and approached by an elegantly curved drive. But we passed by and only halted outside the guard-room. Before I could enter it, an armed sentry stopped me. When I explained that notwithstanding my costume I was really an R.A.F. officer, he let me pass. Though I had chosen for the first stage of my service career what I regarded as my least offensive suit, this simple garment now appeared to me almost foppish, and made me feel self-conscious, but the airmen in the guard-room were kind and helpful and advised me to ring up the adjutant whose office in H.Q. I could see across the courtyard. Unfortunately the adjutant had just gone to lunch. My calling-up papers stated that I was to report before noon, and as it was getting on for one, I was anxious to present myself to the authorities. So I rang up the mess whence the adjutant asked me to call on him at 2 p.m.

I returned to my six-ton truck and within a few minutes found myself at the mess. A civilian waiter asked me what I wanted. 'The adjutant', I replied, more anxious than ever to justify my presence among people who evidently could not help casting inquisitive glances in my direction. Manhill was an operational bomber station, in fact one of the most important in the country, and civilians were not likely to be a common sight at

a centre of active warfare. The waiter returned and handed me a slip of paper on which was scribbled, 'I said 2 p.m.'

Since I didn't dare to ask for a room, in case I committed a further blunder, I decided to seek solace in satisfying at least my desire for food. The wash-room to which I repaired was fortunately empty and so I had opportunity to collect my wits and to arm myself with the courage that I felt so badly in need of before I made my entry into the dining-room. How much easier would this have seemed if my brand-new uniform, instead of lying neatly folded in a suitcase, had fulfilled its more legitimate purpose. At last, however, I found myself in a large and handsome dining-room. At the far end an opulent buffet was piled high with appetizing meat dishes, vegetables, and sweets. I collected my food, and settled down at what seemed to me the least conspicuous end of the three long tables. But even the enjoyment of the excellent food and the comfortable feeling of warmth creeping into my half-frozen limbs could not compensate fully for my acute self-consciousness. Fortunately no-one took the slightest notice of me, and the young men about me carried on their conversations as though no stranger were there.

'D'ye know how long we'll have to stand by?' one youngster asked across the table. 'Till we're told to sit down.' Everyone laughed. 'How long do you think it'll take', another pilot addressed no-one in particular, 'before Congress passes Roosevelt's Neutrality Act?' 'My bet is a fortnight.' 'You're crazy! I say six months.' 'Hope we'll get the Yanks in by December. Wish they'd hurry up.' America remained the topic of conversation throughout lunch, and since evidently nothing in my appearance suggested that I might possibly be an expert on this subject, no-one troubled to seek my opinion and I didn't have to open my mouth except to eat. I was glad when lunch was over.

Immediately after lunch I went over to H.Q. An orderly informed me that the great man hadn't returned yet from lunch, but I could wait in his room. What would he be like, I wondered: a terrifying martinet, the sergeant-major type, or the perfect gentleman of Cranwell vintage?¹

The man who entered the room at two-twenty-five was small and fat with an extremely unmilitary manner. He spoke with a homely cockney accent and politely asked me to sit down and tell him what I wanted. No, he knew nothing about me or about what I was sent to Manhill for. My papers from the Air Ministry hadn't arrived yet. The adjutant seemed less surprised at this situation than was his visitor. 'Officers are often posted before the arrival of their papers', he explained, and I was grateful that he used the word 'officers', thus neither casting doubts upon my credentials nor implying that an operational bomber station was not in the habit of receiving officers straight from civilian life. 'Make yourself comfortable in your room,' he said before I took my leave, 'and perhaps you wouldn't mind calling here to-morrow morning at nine to see the Station Commander, or let's say nine-thirty.'

¹ Before the war Cranwell was the R.A.F.'s Sandhurst.

He ordered an airman to show me the way back to the mess. It was raining harder than ever and the wind had again reached the strength of a gale. Shouting against the elements, the airman tried to keep up a conversation with me. 'Do you know, sir,' he said with something like pride in his voice, 'three times during the last ten years Manhill has been the wettest place in England?' and as though my silent response had not come up to his expectations, he added after a while, 'And last year on three different days this was the coldest spot in England.' I was the last person to disbelieve him.

In the mess I was informed that I had been given a room in one of the long wooden huts near by, and to my delight I found that I had it all to myself. Though tiny, it contained all I could wish for: a big iron bed with proper bedding, a writing-desk, cupboard, a chest of drawers, and the smallest washing-stand I had seen except at Versailles in houses of the French nobility of the seventeenth century. There was even an antediluvian iron stove which the batman promised to light at four. 'We're not allowed to light them before', he apologized, noticing my sneezings and coughings.

The only thing that still damped my enthusiasm was the delay regarding my work. I could hardly control my impatience and should have liked to start straight away. In a year or, perhaps, even in a month, I might possibly desire nothing better than some cushy job with little to do. On my first day in the service, however, there was nothing I should have hated more. Anyhow, there I was all by myself, for the first time in my life in barracks, no longer my own master, and grateful beyond words that it should be so.

My batman was a fine figure of a man, over six foot tall and not a war-time fraud like myself but a regular R.A.F. man with more than five years' service behind him. He lit a fire in my room, but as the wind was coming from what appeared to be the wrong direction, the only results were clouds of smoke but no flames. To keep myself warm I decided to change into my uniform and to get to the mess for an early tea.

One single officer was present in the dining-room. I felt it would be less awkward if I sat next to him, and thus conversation became inevitable. 'What awful weather! Will the Germans get through? What do you do in the evenings? Are you allowed to keep a car? . . .' We both felt self-conscious and our conversation trickled away half-heartedly.

After tea I moved to the anteroom to read the papers, to get used to the atmosphere of the place, and to accustom others to the sight of a junior P.O. with greying hair and a not particularly martial appearance. But every time I resolved to speak to someone my courage failed me and after five I went for a walk along the main road of the aerodrome.

Even the solitary walk didn't prove as pleasant as I had expected. Only the night before my host in London, a colonel in the last war, had spent most of the time teaching me how to salute, but I still felt shaky about it.

In a few months' time everyone in England would possibly be wearing uniform. During the first few weeks of the war not many civilians had drifted into the forces, and the gulf between the two worlds was still very pronounced. My batman had already revealed to me that at Manhill I was the only intruder from the civilian world. Everyone else was a professional airman, and, as I wore my new uniform for the first time in my life, I was terrified whenever I met any of my new colleagues. If they were ordinary airmen I tried to look away as hard as I could to avoid their salute. But my tactics succeeded on one occasion only. All the other men let their arms shoot up like steel springs and saluted with the smartness due to an Air Marshal. The officers were an even greater terror, for the distinction of ranks, epaulettes and rings on sleeves, were a complete mystery to me, and I had no notion whom to salute and whom not. One big man stopped me on the road and asked how I liked the place. He had two or three stripes on his epaulettes. What was he, how was I meant to respond to his amiability? He chatted for a minute or so and then left me with a friendly 'Cheerio'. Was I to click my heels and say, 'Good evening, sir', or merely simulate gaiety and likewise respond 'Cheerio'? I did neither, but smiled ineffectually and turned away with a mumbled 'Good night'. The big fellow no doubt considered me illbred or just stupid.

I returned to my room by six. The wind had changed its direction and my little stove was red-hot. I called in the batman to do whatever he could to prevent an explosion or my suffocation from the heat. My new woollen underclothes, the first I had ever worn in my life, had become unbearable, yet if I replaced them by my light civilian ones, I should have to change again before going out for dinner. Service existence certainly required readjustment—and not on the mental plane alone.

Before dinner the anteroom was packed. 'Half a can; two sherries; I'll have a ginger ale and gin; three more cans.' For the first few minutes I seemed unable to hear anything but the uninterrupted flow of Bacchic orders shouted into a mouthpiece fixed in one corner of the room.

At dinner my neighbour was a young pilot whom everyone called Chink and who had the narrow eyes and high cheekbones of a Chinese. He talked to me without asking any of the obvious questions that might so easily have been embarrassing, and told me that he occupied the room next to mine; that he was nineteen; that life was hell if you couldn't have twelve hours' sleep every night. So he retired immediately after dinner and I followed his advice and did the same. After two hectic days and more or less sleepless nights I felt dead tired, and went to bed to write down in my diary the account of my first day at Manhill. In a room near by someone was playing a gramophone. Outside in the corridor batmen were brushing shoes. I was getting more and more sleepy. What a strange day! How lucky I was. . . .

II

Next morning I called at H.Q. at nine-fifteen. 'The Commanding Officer is visiting one of the dispersal places; he won't be back till eleven,' I was told.

I returned at eleven when the adjutant took me into the C.O.'s room. Group Captain Windlow was small, wiry, and full of boyish energy. He wore an impressive array of ribbons on his chest and in his swift efficiency reminded me of a well-bred pony.

'This officer would like to see you, sir,' said the adjutant. 'He has just been posted to us.'

'What are his duties?'

'His papers haven't come through from the Air Ministry yet. I don't know anything about him, sir.'

'Well, then I can't do anything for him. He'll have to wait.'

'Very good, sir,' and the adjutant saluted, turned round and left the room.

No doubt I was expected to follow him. But as my heart had sunk pretty low I could afford to act unconventionally, and with greater courage than I usually possessed. I took a step towards the C.O.'s writing-table and asked, 'May I show you my Air Ministry letters, sir?' and handed him the letters at the same time.

The C.O. read them carefully and with apparent interest. 'Well, now I know what you're supposed to do. These letters change the whole situation, of course. I'm glad Corring sent you to us; your time here won't be wasted. I'll start you from the top and work you to the very bottom through all the departments. You might as well begin with Intelligence straight away.'

'Thank you, sir.' I saluted, but my heart was hammering as though I had just won the sweepstake. I had never imagined that permission to start work could create so intense a sense of happiness.¹

¹ This was the text of the letters:

Dear Mr. Rom Landau,

Air Commodore X. gave me your letter dated September the 9th, and I am not sure whether you have accepted employment either with the Admiralty or the War Office, but if you are *not* already tied up we shall be *very* glad to obtain your services in connection with the employment of Polish Air Force personnel in this country. We should probably post you, in the first instance, to two or three different places in succession where you will get an insight into the working of the Royal Air Force with a view to employing the knowledge so obtained in helping to organize Polish units on similar lines. If, therefore, you are willing to do this, and are not already engaged, I would be grateful if you would fill in the enclosed form and return it to me personally.

Yours sincerely, A. CORRING, *Air Marshal*.

Dear Mr. Rom Landau,

Thank you very much for your letter. I have countersigned your appli-

The C.O. led the way to a room on the door of which were the words, 'No-one admitted'. We entered it without knocking. The room was large and bright. Several officers were leaning over maps and photographs. I was introduced to the Chief Intelligence Officer, a comfortable-looking Wing Commander, the wide expanse of his chest covered with ribbons. He was half-lying across a long drawing-table and tracing with rulers and dividers lines and circles on a huge chart of the Baltic and the North Sea.

After the C.O. had explained in a few words what my job was to be, he addressed me without stopping in his work. 'Come closer and see what I'm doing here. This is the plan of a major operation we are preparing in conjunction with the Navy for to-morrow morning. We're going to attack the German Fleet off Z.'

Though his words sounded casual, they produced in me the second major thrill within the last ten minutes. For a moment I actually felt the weakness in my legs that accompanies sudden emotional shocks. A few minutes after having been really accepted into the fellowship of the Air Force, I found myself in one of the centres of our war effort. The war was still young; everything about it was new to us, and to me, at any rate, mysterious. Since for the time being the Navy and the Air Force, or rather our bombers, were the only arm which we employed to fight Germany, I could not help feeling that I was going to be initiated into some of the most closely guarded secrets behind our conduct of the war. I knew, of course, that somewhere plans for battles had to be laid and secret schemes worked out, but I had never imagined that within twenty-four hours of putting aside my civilian clothes I should find myself suddenly at the very heart of such planning.

The Wing Commander explained to me the details of next day's operation. This was where the German fleet, spotted only a few hours previously by our reconnaissance planes and slowly steaming from east to west, was likely to be by to-morrow morning; this would be the course taken by our own ships to meet the Germans; and this the route that early to-morrow morning bombers from Manhill and other stations would take to attack the enemy. These then were their targets, their duties, such and such bombs would be dropped. 'The armament officer will tell you more about the bombs. Ask him to take you to the bomb dump before the bombing up of the aircraft. I hope the C.O. will let you be in the Ops. room while the action proceeds.' The Wing Commander finished tracing the

cation form so that it will not be necessary for you to obtain the references from Admiral A. I expect that we shall ask you to come up for a medical board with a view to your being commissioned at an early date, and as soon as that formality is completed, provided that you are medically fit, we shall post you to a unit where you can get an idea of R.A.F. organization quickly.

Yours sincerely, A. CORRIG, *Air Marshal*.

last line on the chart, and, after having disengaged himself, not without some difficulty, from the long table supporting him, he took me into his own study.

In front of the maps and charts which covered the walls of his room, he continued for another hour to explain the nature of the work of his department. When he had finished it was time to go to lunch. On my way to the mess I no longer felt a fraud, and in the dining-room took my seat unhesitatingly among a group of young pilots.

'How are you feeling to-day, Tom?' one of my neighbours asked a fair-haired boy opposite me. 'Browned off.' 'What's the matter?' 'Nothing's the matter, that's just it. Hanging around, doing bloody nothing.' 'Aren't you on the show to-morrow morning?' 'No, are you?' 'You bet I am.' 'What time do you start?' 'Seven a.m.' 'When will you be back?' 'Supposed to report back after ten.'

They were talking about something which, if it came off, would thrill millions of people all over the world; yet they spoke as casually as if they were referring to a game of football.

On my way from lunch to my hut I met the Chief Intelligence Officer. 'Try to be at my office to-morrow morning after nine-thirty when the boys are due back and I have to interrogate them. You may be interested.'

DIARY

I am beginning to realize that to give up one's private life for the sake of war service is not enough. One has to give up one's former attitude of mind as well. To observe life from a purely individual point of view is not only legitimate but desirable in peace-time, but I am beginning to doubt whether such an attitude can be justified where impersonal service is required. When the Intelligence Officer was explaining to me the intricate workings of his department, I caught myself more than once failing to take in what he was telling me: not because I was inattentive, but because my attention was focused too much on those aspects of the situation that aroused my interest as an observer and an author. Yet I really ought to have concentrated first and foremost on being a pupil. At present I do not find it easy to depersonalize myself into a purely passive agent. I must make a serious effort, for I shan't succeed in my future job unless I can wipe out my former personality and all former interests. It won't do to treat my new career merely as an interesting subject for psychological or literary observation. All my enthusiasm will amount to nothing unless I can identify myself completely with my new interests.

III

On my second morning I was awakened by the roar of the Wellingtons. They will soon be setting out for the North Sea, I thought to myself. Good luck to you, boys. After dinner, the night before, I had asked the C.O. whether I might witness the take-off of our squadron but he did not seem very keen, and I dropped the subject. I was hoping, however, that

the Intelligence Officer would remember his promise and allow me to be present in his room when the crews returned.

But they didn't take off, after all. Was the weather unfavourable, I wondered. Or had the German fleet escaped?

I reported for duty at nine, but was told to come back in an hour's time. So I went back to the mess. The anteroom was crowded with disgruntled youths, all waiting, waiting. Some were reading papers and magazines, others were asleep. The rain had stopped and, at last, the sun was shining. The blue smoke of cigarettes curled against the pale gold which floated through the windows. But everyone seemed irritated. No doubt I was the only person at peace with the world. The exhilaration of the last twenty-four hours had proved a balsam even for my aching throat, and I felt like a king.

When I reported for duty at ten I was told to call on the Chief Engineer Officer. I spent two hours under his guidance, accompanying him through his various departments, and was to report to him again at two. Meanwhile most of the pilots were still lounging about in easy chairs, asleep or merely bored.

The day's atmosphere throughout the station could only be described as flat. Even in the departments not vitally related to the postponed raid, no-one seemed to know how to kill time. After an hour with the Chief Engineer, I visited Ops. room and then Intelligence to pick up some more professional information, but in both places officers and men alike were engrossed in newspapers. They did not appear to object to my presence, but neither did any of them seem particularly eager to devote himself to the new pupil. The disgruntled expressions made you feel that from the commanding officer down to the youngest aircraft hand, everyone had been cheated of some personal enjoyment. But could one blame them? They had studied maps, held conferences, plotted courses, checked and re-checked the engines, loaded the bombs, swung the compasses, cleaned and synchronized the guns, and done everything to fulfil their chief aim in life which was to send out Wellingtons to drop bombs on the enemy. Every thought and every desire at Manhill was focused upon that aim. When it could not be achieved, the entire place suffered from a sense of disappointment. In the icy wind and rain of the previous day, Manhill had been a far more cheerful place than it was under that blue sky and brilliant sun.

Unable to rouse anybody's interest, I went to my room to write a few more notes about my new work. But I had hardly settled down when a terrific roar of engines rent the air outside. I rushed to the window, and there they were, rising into the sky, one after another, heavy and immense, yet proceeding with incomparable grace. Was the raid on, after all, or was it merely an exercise? It was 4 p.m. and so I walked across to the mess for tea.

The very first officer I met winked at me. 'Did you see them take off?'

'Yes, have they really started?'

He put a finger to his lips. 'Shh', and then in a whisper, 'Eighteen of them have gone, over a hundred boys'.

'I am glad', I heard myself say, and a second later felt surprised at my own words. Glad? . . . A hundred young men? . . . Yes, glad indeed.

The anteroom was transformed. Even had you been blind and deaf you could not have helped feeling the changed atmosphere. No trace of the morning's discontent! No-one referred to what was in everybody's mind; yet the very air seemed to be charged with a powerful electric current. Though it would take hours before our aircraft could be expected back, eyes were constantly turned towards the windows. Normally even the loudest roar of an aircraft disturbed no-one. This time every passing motor-car made heads turn towards the windows. My cold was worse and I had intended to spend the afternoon in bed, but I found that I could not settle to return to my room.

By six o'clock I felt too impatient to remain in the anteroom and walked to H.Q. to report to the Intelligence Officer who, after all, had asked me to call on him when the crews were expected to be back. He was with the C.O. in Ops. room, so thither I proceeded, and asked meekly whether I might stay. 'O.K.', the C.O. said, and I tried to make myself as small and inoffensive as I possibly could.

On the C.O.'s right the Ops Officer was busying himself with numerous telephone switches; on his left an Army liaison officer was conversing *sotto voce* with an army orderly. The table in the centre of the room was covered with charts on which two young Pilot Officers were plotting the courses of our planes. On the wall facing the C.O. was a huge blackboard which showed at a glance all the details about each aircraft taking part in the raid.

The Wing Commander began to ~~explain~~ further details of the 'show'. So far no news had come through as to whether our planes had found their target or not. They were not allowed to get in touch with us by wireless until well on their way home. At six-thirty the first bit of news came through but I was still too much of a novice to understand it. At ten past seven a 'phone call from the watch-tower on the aerodrome announced the landing of the first aircraft. Have they found their target and dropped their bombs? was the unspoken yet all predominant question animating Ops. room.

The Wing Commander beckoned me to follow him to his office, where he hurriedly rearranged the furniture so as to make more room for the crews. At seven-twenty-five the captain of the first aircraft appeared: a short, thick-set youth with straw-coloured hair and a twinkle in his blood-shot eyes. He was wearing fur-lined overalls and fur-lined boots. Though the Intelligence Officer, a man in the early fifties, was an old hand at his job, he appeared as tense as a schoolboy, and his forehead was wet with

sweat. Lighting a fresh cigarette, he asked the pilot, 'Did you find the target?'

'No, sir.'

'Did you see anything?'

'Only a fishing fleet.'

'No Huns?'

'No, sir.'

The former tension on the Wing Commander's face gave place to a look of profound disappointment.

Outside there was the shuffling of feet, and presently a whole crowd of fur-coated pilots, observers, and air-gunners filled the room. They saluted but otherwise there was no ceremony and some of them dropped heavily into the few chairs. None of them had seen the German fleet. Leaning over the charts they explained the position of the fishing fleet and other details, but the Wing Commander was no longer interested. He took me to his own office where he immediately rang up Group H.Q. to make a preliminary report.

I went back to Ops. room. The C.O. was unperturbed. The failure of his eighteen aircraft was registered as little in his expression as had been the excitement preceding their return. But the other officers and N.C.O.s were excitedly discussing the raid. 'Dam' bad luck', 'I bet Coastal Command made a mess of Jerry's position'. 'Are you surprised? All their navigators are green.' 'This is what always happens', and so they went on, and an undertone of despair was in their voices.

I returned to the Intelligence room. The Wing Commander was there alone and now let himself go. 'This always happens with those ruddy bastards at Coastal Command. You wait for days all keyed up; the boys almost burst with expectation, and finally when you're given the O.K. it's too late and the target can't be found. To hell with them.'

'Why is that so, sir?' I asked.

'Why, you ask me,' the Wing Commander burst out. 'Why? Because of lack of co-ordination, because there is no proper discipline; because Commands still regard the war as a sort of football match. We'll have to learn a lot about discipline and co-ordination from the Hun if we don't want to lose this ruddy war.'

I felt it would be presumptuous on my part to pursue the subject any further, so I saluted and took my leave.

It was nearly eight-thirty when I reached the mess. The dining-room was crowded and animated; but the animation seemed artificial. No-one spoke of the raid, but of drinks and games and films. Flying was the one subject that wasn't mentioned. Even those who were generally most reticent conversed at the top of their voices, and the entire company seemed to be eating far more than usual. You didn't need to be an astute psychologist to realize that everyone was doing his best to make the crews—and themselves as well—forget their missed target.

IV

On the following day I spent the whole morning and afternoon going over the actual aircraft. I am by nature not particularly interested in any sort of machinery. But who would not be impressed by the beauty of those planes and the ingenuity that went into their making; by the silent efficiency of their hydraulic gun turrets, by their intricate instruments and ingenious bomb sights? And all this inventiveness, for what purpose? What indeed? . . . But I had no right to ask such questions. None of us had the right to ask them. They belonged to our past and to a code of ethics that could have no place in a war like the second world war.

At tea I was told that I should be moved from my hut into a room in the mess. This was indeed a promotion. My new room had central heating and hot and cold water, and was fitted out with every modern comfort. When I went to bed after a hot bath in a bathroom with lavender-coloured tiles and a rubber floor, I felt positively sybaritic.

On my first morning in the new quarters I had an opportunity to observe certain aspects of mess life of which the little hut had afforded only scanty glimpses. On my way down to breakfast through the long corridor of the first floor, I noticed that at least from every third bedroom a wireless or gramophone was contributing to the cacophonous symphony with which the new day was greeted. Most of the doors were open. Some of the occupants were only just getting up; others were standing in their pyjama trousers, stripped to the waist, and shaving. One or two lads were going to bed after night duty. In the dining-room too were men who had only just returned from a night flight and were having breakfast before they retired to bed.

Though I had been at Manhill only a few days, I no longer seemed to be regarded a stranger. Since my work did not involve pushing someone else out of his job, I was met without suspicion. In fact, the unique nature of my future job which was supposed to be a secret known to the few senior officers alone, but soon had become common knowledge, assured me of a status to which neither rank nor personal merit could ever have raised me. Some of the younger officers teased me by saying, 'We know you're a foreign spy, of course', but their eager helpfulness was a source of constant gratification to me. Their attitude gave substance to my original enthusiasm for the R.A.F. and made it easy for me to identify myself with the new life. How easy this identification became I sometimes noticed with amused surprise though not without alarm.

One of the Intelligence officers was a man with most of the qualifications which in my civilian days I had regarded with admiration. He was a scholar with a passion for conversation, an experienced traveller with a discriminating sense of values, keenly interested in most aspects of culture, and free from all intellectual prejudices, in short, the best type of wall-

bred and cultured Englishman. Feeling starved for intellectual intercourse and having discovered that my air force exterior had been superimposed only quite recently upon a literary past, he tried to engage me in conversation on several occasions. A short while before I should have responded to his advances with alacrity. At Manhill, however, I found myself getting bored by them. There seemed something strangely unreal about the topics he would choose, and I found it impossible to work up the slightest interest for purely intellectual and aesthetic problems. The only subjects that seemed worth while to me were the Air Force and the technicalities of air warfare. Since my attitude was not due merely to an intellectual resolve, I sought every opportunity to talk shop, and the reading of *Aeroplane* and *Flight* had become infinitely more exhilarating than that of any literary or political paper.

V

On my first morning as an inhabitant of the mess the C.O. announced that in the afternoon some big noise would be visiting Manhill and there would be a parade. Since this was to be a new experience for me I called after lunch on the C.O. to ask whether I might watch the parade from an inconspicuous corner.

'Indeed you may,' he replied, but immediately added, 'As a matter of fact it would be a good thing if you were to lead the men of 941 Squadron on parade. Most of our officers are flying men and will attend the parade with their crews. We are short of officers, there is only the adjutant of 00 Squadron who will lead his own men, so you might as well take charge of 941.'

'But I know nothing about parades or marching or giving orders, sir,' I mumbled in a state of profound confusion.

'There's nothing difficult about it. Anyhow you'll have to learn one day. Ask one of the boys how it's done. It won't take you five minutes.'

I didn't dare to argue, but clicked my heels and rushed to the aerodrome where the men were already assembling for the parade.

Having always had the individualist's and intellectual's easy contempt for marches and parades, I knew nothing about either. In fact they were as full of mysteries for me as Chinese grammar. And now I was supposed to appear on parade in a fairly conspicuous position and in front of some important Air Marshal.

I managed to find two young pilots with whom I had already made friends and told them of my predicament. They laughed, but immediately took me in hand, giving me the necessary instructions. I should have to give no orders and do nothing off my own bat, they consoled me. All I should have to do was to march in front of the men of 941 Squadron. But even the kind reassurances of my two mentors did little to calm my distraught soul. Some people in the mess had suggested that it would be Ludlow Hewitt himself, head of Bomber Command, the most famous

disciplinarian in the Air Force, the sound of whose very name was said to make grey-haired Air Marshals tremble. As far as I was concerned I didn't care whether it was to be L.H. or the King himself—I was far too much preoccupied with the trial which awaited me personally. If only they had warned me early in the morning I should have been able to spend several hours in trying to master whatever words of command, steps, and pitfalls there were to be known!

My subsequent experiences had much of the curiously vivid quality of a dream. From the moment when I found myself in front of one of the large hangars at the head of some hundred N.C.O.s and men of 941 Squadron, facing across the wide expanse of the tarmac my opposite number who led 00 Squadron—an experienced Flight Lieutenant, smart and composed as the hero in a film—I seemed to be existing in a rarefied atmosphere of unreality, and yet to be conscious of each minute detail. What must the N.C.O.s behind me be thinking of their leader, I wondered to myself. They hardly needed to look to realize that I knew nothing about how to march or to stand (either to attention or at ease) or how to make a correct turn. By Jove, they will be cursing the C.O. for having landed them with such a chief!

We had been waiting for some twenty minutes when at the far end of the aerodrome several big cars appeared. Soon afterwards a group of officers and civilians began to walk towards the tarmac. Suddenly a half-suppressed ripple ran through the lines behind me and I caught the whispered words, 'The King'. Without moving my head I turned my eyes in the direction whence our guests were coming, and there indeed was the King in Air Force uniform, and behind him the Secretary of State for Air, and a bevy of senior Air Force and Army officers and a few civilians.

Gracious goodness, gracious goodness, I repeated stupidly to myself. But another section of my mind continued with grim humour to reflect upon the extraordinary ways of destiny that forced me to appear on the first parade of my life in front of the King himself and of most of the notabilities of the R.A.F. But then, the more charitable part of my mind took up the argument: if you make a fool of yourself, which you can hardly avoid, the responsibility isn't really yours but the C.O.'s. After all, you're only obeying orders, however foolish these may be. Yes, but the disgrace will be yours, the other voice replied pitilessly, and it will bring your glorious beginning in the service to an inglorious end. Isn't this a situation far more ideal for a film producer than for the more sober designs of reality? Well, it's too late to run away or to commit suicide, the first voice tried to console me, and you might as well face it. With this final decision the inner dialogue came to an end, and I reached the inevitable conclusion that events must take their course. If there were such things as guardian angels, I reflected, this was obviously one of the moments when they might have to prove their existence, for their services would certainly be required. If, however, they did not exist and I was meant to disgrace

941 Squadron and Manhill in front of my King, nothing I could now do would sway the hand of destiny.

The King, accompanied by Air Vice-Marshal Bewdley, the officer commanding our Group, and Group Captain Windlow, first walked along 00 Squadron. The other dignitaries of the R.A.F. followed him at a distance. Still further behind two civilians were keeping to themselves. One of them was tall and crowned by a bowler hat, unmistakably the King's detective; the other, smart in an unobtrusive way, must have been the King's valet. The King stopped in front of one or two officers of 00 Squadron and exchanged a few words with them. When he had reached the last man of the squadron he crossed the tarmac and began to inspect 941 Squadron. In another second or two he would reach me. He was looking tired, but extremely youthful. Just before passing me he stopped.

'You are training as Liaison Officer with the Polish Air Force, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

The King paused for a second. 'Are there many Polish airmen in this country?'

'Not yet, sir. They won't be arriving in England for another month.'

The King hesitated again, and I felt sorry for him that he should have had to ask all these questions. 'Do you know how many airmen have escaped from Poland?'

'I am afraid, sir, no-one knows the exact number, but I believe rather more than a thousand will be trained in England and another thousand in France.'

The King paused again. 'I see,' he said, and added after a moment, 'I hope they'll be a great success.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The King shook me by the hand and passed on.

The dream continued. We marched past the King and then lined along the road through which the royal car was to drive towards the mess. While we were waiting one of our senior officers came hurriedly up to me. 'I say, will you report immediately at H.Q. I'm sending along someone else to take your place here. The newspaper men from London are here and they want to interview you about the King's conversation with you.'

I rushed towards H.Q., but by the time I got there I had collected myself sufficiently to realize that unless I was given orders from the C.O., I could not say anything to the reporters. The prospective arrival of the Poles in this country was a matter with both political and military implications, and it was a secret jealously guarded by our authorities. My 'conversation' with the King would obviously give the whole show away.

When I entered a room at H.Q. a dozen reporters with pad and pencil in hand were waiting. 'I am afraid I can't say anything', I excused myself, 'unless I have the Commanding Officer's orders to do so.' They rang up the C.O. and asked me to speak to him. 'For heaven's sake, you mustn't

say a word. Blast those busybodies; haven't they got anything better to do than pester my officers?' 'Yes, sir.'

Thus ended my first parade.

VI

The next day started with instructions about maintenance of aircraft, but I finished by eleven and since there was nothing else to do before lunch, decided to call on the C.O. to ask whether as a special favour I might be allowed to start taking flying lessons. I also wanted to ask whether I might get forty-eight hours' leave to spend the week-end at home. I had cut myself adrift from civilian life within less than twenty-four hours and had had to leave many things undone which I was anxious to set right. Having been told that I would be given no instructions during the week-end, I thought a short leave would be the obvious solution to my week-end problem.

The C.O. was just leaving H.Q. 'May I see you for a moment, sir?'

'If you have nothing to do, come to Grazefield with me. I have a free morning and am just going over to have a glass of beer with the 00 boys.'

So we drove to Grazefield and then across the fields which had been taken over by 00 Squadron as their war-time aerodrome. The anteroom was full of young men, standing by and waiting to take off on a raid planned for the afternoon. They were exhilarated by the prospect of the coming action. Only those who were to stay behind were allowed to have sherry; the others had to content themselves with beer. After an hour's pleasant chatter during which every subject under the sun was mentioned, except the raid, we left.

Back in the car, I asked the C.O. for the two favours. He ignored my plea for flying lessons, but instantly granted me week-end leave. He asked where I lived and when I said near Chichester, he said, 'Why don't you ask one of the boys to fly you to Tangmere or Thorney Island?', and before I had had time to recover from my surprise, he continued, 'I'll ask the captain of the station flight to take you to Sussex and I'll 'phone the C.O. at Thorney to have a car to take you from the aerodrome to your place'.

However, as the captain of the station flight himself had asked for week-end leave, my own leave was not to start till Monday.

On Saturday I worked in various departments all through the morning, but the weather having deteriorated, everyone was dismissed for the rest of the day.

Since my appearance on parade with 941 Squadron, I seemed to be regarded as belonging to that squadron and I no longer took my daily orders from Group Captain Windlow but from the officer commanding it. They had accepted me as a sort of white elephant who had no power to interfere with anyone but provided a certain lustre of uniqueness. After all, never before in the course of its proud career had the squadron had to train an R.A.F. officer for liaison duties with a foreign air force to be

established on British soil, and anything that was out of the ordinary was welcomed by its members.

The sleepy atmosphere of a Saturday afternoon prevailed throughout the entire station, and so I retired to my room to go through my work notes of the last few days. I could not quite get over the complete freedom which I was given. For I was allowed to do as much or as little work as I wished. The C.O. had asked the heads of the various departments to put at my disposal any relevant documents and to help me in my task of absorbing as much about Air Force matters as I could possibly crowd into my presumably brief tuition at Manhill. This freedom placed the entire responsibility upon my own shoulders, and if I didn't learn all that I was supposed to while I was there, I could blame no-one but myself. How different this system was from anything on the Continent! I could well imagine the compulsion, the drill, the swotting, if I had had to undergo a similar training abroad. At the same time I realized that this policy of *laissez-faire* was a privilege inherent in the very nature of my exceptional position. If dozens of liaison officers instead of just a single one had had to be trained, obviously the whole method would have been different. The situation being as it was, I was enabled to gain a deeper insight into the organization of a bomber station and bomber squadron than I could have done by any other method. I felt deeply grateful to Air Marshal Corring for having posted me to Manhill.

VII

After 3 p.m. Linnes, one of the young pilots with whom I had made friends, drifted into my room in pyjamas and with a little golden cocker which he regarded as his mascot, and we talked almost till tea-time. During tea he suggested that we might as well spend the evening at Cambridge which was only twenty-odd miles away. I agreed, saying that if he could procure a car I would provide the necessary petrol. Within ten minutes a young Scotsman with an infectious laugh and an impertinent little moustache the colour of an unripe carrot, appeared outside the mess at the wheel of the smallest and most ancient-looking Baby Austin I had ever seen. With the best will in the world it was impossible to accommodate any of the many additional aspirants eager to spend the evening at Cambridge, and soon after five the three of us moved off.

The aim of my two young friends was to drink. Since my teetotal presence would only have embarrassed them there seemed no point in my sharing the evening with them. So when we reached Cambridge we separated, agreeing to meet again at ten.

I went to call on an old friend who quite recently had moved into a handsome old house. I am ashamed to say that I found it difficult to show any interest either in a conversation focused entirely on peace-time pursuits, or in the colour schemes of the rooms, the antique furniture, pictures, and books which he exhibited to me with pride. Before very long I

left my somewhat disconcerted host, and after a walk through the darkening streets went to dine in a restaurant that my friend had recommended to me. Everything about the place was subdued: the shaded lights, the beige colour of the walls, the whispered conversation of the dining couples, and the insipid food. I was the only person in uniform and the atmosphere of genteel reticence got on my nerves. But for the fact that the waitress, who spoke in whispers as though she were conveying state secrets, took more than an hour to serve the five courses, I should have departed in less than half the time. And all the while I was longing for the brilliant lights in our mess, and for the loud voices and the boisterous laughter that I might have enjoyed there.

DIARY

When after dinner I walked once again through the dark streets I reminded myself that I must not allow this new enthusiasm to make a prig of me. Is it merely the novelty of my experiences that makes me feel as I do? No, and a thousand times no. I have no doubt that to-day countless men throughout the land are feeling exactly as I do. Their enthusiasm for a new task is something bigger than their individual likes and foibles. For several years now I have been convinced that the hour of national decision was simply bound to come and that we should have to make up our minds where we stood. Would we wish to continue to make a compromise with everything which at heart we despised? I never made a secret of my longing for the hour when the poison of Germanism could be prevented from contaminating the atmosphere of civilized humanity; when once and for all Germany's arrogant and insatiable lust for power and world domination would be challenged; when what still remained decent in the world could assert itself triumphantly instead of submitting meekly to Germanic threats and to the hypnotizing voices of German Kultur and propaganda. At a moment like the present can there be anything more important than to prepare oneself for a complete defeat of the eternal enemy? Must not everything else be subordinated to the exclusive aim of victory? I am recapitulating these obvious truths to myself not to excuse my present state of mind but to remind myself of facts that explain that state.

Punctually at 10 p.m. my friends appeared at the appointed place, and we started for home. Though Linnes and McRury had been drinking steadily throughout the evening they seemed none the worse for their 'orgy'. The only thing alcohol did to them was to loosen their tongues and pull down certain barriers which national and service conventions had erected within them. Hidden in the blackness of the night, they let themselves go and talked of things which under the more decorous conditions of the mess never seemed to come up to the surface. Their talk was of women. Knowing that I had visited and lived in many foreign countries, they wanted to know about the women of Italy and China, Africa and America. There was genuine pathos in Linnes's words when finally he exclaimed in a tragic voice, 'Oh God, we are repressed in this hopeless

country. Why the hell can't we live and let live and enjoy life as others do? I've suffered more through this cursed repression than anyone would ever believe—and all just because of our national hypocrisy and because I wear an officer's uniform! For once McRury did not respond with a joke but remained silent.

VIII

The poor C.O. must have got fed up with my persistence, for finally he gave me permission to take flying lessons. I doubted whether actual flying would form part of my duties with the Poles, but it made me feel more of a fraud than ever to be an R.A.F. officer, to live among men who were among the crack airmen in the service, and yet to be completely ignorant of how an aeroplane flew. I even felt that no-one who could not make himself useful in an aircraft on an operation had the right to wear the R.A.F. uniform. The distinction that went with that uniform did not rest upon the achievements of officers who looked after equipment and issued railway warrants, of dentists, Treasury officials, and administrative clerks, all of whom were camouflaged in Air Force uniform. Were those of us who knew next to nothing about aircraft, navigation, or bomb sights really justified in wearing the uniform? I hardly thought so. Though I was still in the dark as to the precise nature of my future duties, I was convinced that I would be far more useful if I learned to fly and had some inkling of what the Polish pilots in my charge would be talking about.

My first flying lesson was planned for the afternoon. I was both looking forward to it and dreading it. While my head told me that I ought to get on with my flying as soon as possible, my foolish heart contracted from funk. I hadn't yet had time to grow out of my civilian cowardice, and having spent my life in a predominantly intellectual atmosphere where I had not been brought up to regard physical hardihood as an outstanding virtue, I realized that I suffered from a deficiency in that courage which was the backbone of an airman's life.

My flying instructor was to be Flight Lieutenant Thwaites, the captain of the station flight and a pilot of some fame in the service. It was he who early each morning, no matter what the weather, went up more than twenty-five thousand feet, making the meteorological flight for the service. Though on the previous day he had departed on forty-eight hours' leave, he had not neglected to leave behind an ominous little note in which he said, 'I'll try to be back on Sunday in time to give you some instruction at three o'clock'. 'Some instruction' was to take place in a minute open aeroplane. But he did not return till after four, and so it was too dark to have a lesson.

The next morning started sunny but with strong wind. When I came down to breakfast one of the officers said, 'Well, another washout for you. Baby Mag won't stand this sort of wind.' Baby Mag was the Magister in which I was to learn to fly.

'I suppose it's too windy for a lesson, isn't it?' I said when I met Thwaites.

'I don't think so', he answered puffing at his pipe and giving me one of his typical looks, encouraging and at the same time with just the faintest hint of irony. Though only in the early twenties, Thwaites was possessed of a natural dignity that made him conspicuous even among Manhill's remarkable young men. He was tall and of a fine physique, but not particularly good-looking. Whenever he replied to my questions regarding my forthcoming 'initiation', an unmistakable twinkle appeared in his blue-grey eyes as though he were not taken in by my externally casual manner. He knew, if anyone did, that his new pupil was not a white elephant but just a frightened rabbit. In anyone else I should have strongly resented this sort of omniscience, but I did not mind it in Thwaites; in fact, it gave me a sense of comfort.

When I called in the afternoon at station flight, situated in the smallest of the hangars, Thwaites was working in his office, puffing at his pipe. I tried to appear nonchalant, but I didn't deceive him.

He first took me into the hangar to show me various details of the Mag.—painted bright yellow—and when we got back to his office, he handed me a flying helmet, suit, and fur-lined boots. I put on the clothes with the various zip fasteners clumsily, and, without saying a word, Thwaites helped me to get into them. It was both exhilarating and soothing to put myself completely into the hands of another person and, as it happened, one little more than half my age. We wasted a good deal of time over the parachute harness which in the end proved too small, so that a new one had to be produced. Whilst Thwaites and a corporal were adjusting the various straps, I felt like a patient watching the surgeon prepare his instruments for an operation. Yet I was growing inwardly more and more insensitive to the surrounding world which was receding into a far distance.

Slowly and clumsily I managed to get into the tiny machine which might have appeared less frighteningly small had I not spent all the week in constant contact with Wellingtons, the biggest bombers in the R.A.F. The Mag.'s two tiny cockpits were placed one behind the other, open and unprotected. For a moment my inner numbness gave place to a new wave of self-consciousness which, in turn, was followed by inner tension. I felt neither elated nor afraid but just tense. If there was any other single sensation that I was able to register, it was the desire to please Thwaites.

'How long are you going to keep me in the air, sir?' I asked.

'Why?' he replied, knowing all the time why I had put the question.

'You don't think, sir, I might get sick?' I tried to sound jocular.

'Do you suffer from sea-sickness?'

'Not as a rule,' which was quite true, 'but this isn't the sea.'

'We'll probably fly for about half an hour.'

He climbed into the front cockpit and switched on the engine. After the roar of the Wellingtons the song of the little yellow bird sounded almost lyrical.

We moved out of the hangar towards the tarmac. I tried to look neither to the right nor to the left. Yet I couldn't help seeing the yellow toy leave the ground. This was the moment which I had dreaded most. The aeroplane jerked a few times, but soon gathered speed, long before I had been able to get accustomed to the many new sensations. I was thankful that there was no mirror by the pilot's seat to reflect the face of the wretch behind him, as Thwaites would have seen a face set in lines of anxiety, eyes behind goggles trying not to look at the earth below, and a pair of hands endeavouring in vain to grip something. Only when taking my first riding lesson had I felt equally helpless—though less frightened—and equally eager to hold on to something. But the Mag. was not equipped with a horse's mane to which I might cling, and though I knew that I was strapped tightly to the plane and could not fall out whatever Thwaites might do, to clutch at something would have given me at least some symbolical support. Finally I managed to hold on with one hand to a protruding bit of metal under the tiny windscreen and with the other to a gadget inside the cockpit.

It must have taken me at least five minutes to begin to get used to the new sensation of flying in a tiny open aircraft and in a strong wind which made it bump more heavily than I had anticipated. Though Thwaites had explained to me beforehand that, once in the air, the aeroplane becomes part of the air and moves with it, it seemed to me that in actual fact it was doing everything it could to oppose itself to the air and was struggling to assert its own independence. I argued with myself that I ought to enjoy every moment of the experience and that this was an important step to bring me nearer to my aim; but the inner tension was still too strong to permit the voice of reason to become audible. Only very gradually did I begin to relax by making myself forget the landscape which swayed and moved round about us, and by concentrating on the instruments in the cockpit.

The lesson itself was of the most rudimentary nature. Only now and again Thwaites's voice would reach me through my ear-pieces, telling me to get hold of the stick or place my feet on the rudders and make a movement to the right or the left or make the plane climb or dive. After we had landed, Thwaites said in his kindness of heart that always seemed to glow beneath his pose of gentle irony, 'Quite good for a start', but I did not feel that I had covered myself with glory.

IX

A second flight in one day! Soon after lunch Thwaites came up to me to say that he was ready to take me to Thorney. So I collected my suitcase, pushed it into the Mag. and off we went. There was a south wind of fifty-five miles per hour, which slowed us down considerably, making the aircraft jerk and bounce, and I wished more and more that the journey would come to an end. I enjoyed it only at its very last stage when we were approaching the scenery familiar to me and I could amuse myself by

deciphering individual villages, woods, and roads, all of them old friends. When we arrived at Thorney I wanted Thwaites to come home to tea with me, but it would soon be dark and he was anxious to return to Manhill before nightfall. So I waited until he signed the book in the watch-tower, had his tank filled with petrol and took off. Then I left for home.

I was glad to be home, but somehow everything in the beloved place was different as if it belonged to a world that was strange to me. Only a few weeks previously my ambition had been to find a war job that would enable me to spend frequent week-ends at home. Yet after less than an hour I began to feel restless. Walking through the house among the familiar things and through the garden in which I myself had planted each shrub, each flower, I felt as though I didn't belong there at all. The dogs were the only creatures of the old world that had lost none of their former power over me. But even their response could not stifle my eagerness to be back at Manhill. The aerodrome with its inmates, hangars, and planes beckoned from Suffolk's bleak turnip fields submerged in water, as though it represented the only world that was real and worth while. I was determined to cut my leave short. It was only when I found that I could not cope in a single evening with the amount of work waiting for me that I decided to remain my full time.

DIARY

I got back from leave in the afternoon. At the station at Shipton the service van was waiting to take me to Manhill. I felt impatient throughout the drive and when we turned the last bend and the hangars suddenly appeared in front of me, I felt that this was my real home.

I still fail to understand fully what it is that within less than a fortnight has made me lose my heart so completely to the R.A.F. After all, the life I relinquished when I joined up was a very desirable one: independence, friends, stimulating work, a lovely home, enjoyable country pursuits, and the companionship of dogs. And yet not for a long time have I been so happy as when I got back to the aerodrome. Is it the fine spirit that permeates everything at Manhill that attracts me so strongly? It may be that pettiness and selfishness exist among the men whose lives I am now sharing as they do in most other human communities. So far, however, I have not come up against them; all I see are loyalty and comradeship. However one-sided my experiences hitherto may have been, for the moment they provide the only rod by which I can assess my reactions to the R.A.F. in general and to Manhill in particular.

Yet my love for the R.A.F. has not obliterated my sense of criticism. It did not need the words of the Chief Intelligence Officer the other day to make me realize that few men at Manhill seem alive to the exigencies of a modern war fought against a foe as cunning and efficient as any devil that has ever tried to gain dominion over mankind. They sometimes speak of the 'Hun', but they regard him as an opponent in a sporting bout. They haven't

even begun to hate him. Yet I doubt whether without hatred one can fight successfully a war of so fundamental a spiritual nature as the present. In a Christian society there should be no place for hatred, only for love. On the other hand, in a Christian order of things the very idea of total war has no place. Such a war cannot be measured by Christian standards. At the same time, the love that should form the guiding principle in days of peace has seldom been given much scope. If our hatred to-day is as insipid and half-hearted as was our love before the war, then we are not likely to make of it a greater success than we did of the so-called peace that preceded it and we shall not summon up those resources of unity of purpose, ruthless determination and courage, without which no major war can be won decisively.

True, Manhill and the R.A.F. are in this respect merely typical of the country in general, but though Britain as a whole may have no notion of what a hundred per cent prosecution of total war implies, I do not feel that such an attitude can be justified among men in the particular service which is our chief offensive arm. Wherever I turn, I seem to detect signs of slackness, casualness, and above all, lack of co-ordination, which result from an inherent deficiency both in discipline and in the realization of what we are up against. The spirit of playing the game and of treating life in not too professional a frame of mind may be charming, but I cannot help viewing it with concern in our H.Q., in the crew rooms, workshops, hangars, and in the mess. The crews are allowed to waste countless hours in drinking and playing cards, and yet their essential knowledge of geography and of their raid targets is often lamentably small.

Perhaps because I am a newcomer I find that there isn't enough 'shop' talk and far too much schoolboyish gossip and practical joking. Yet it is this very attitude of happy-go-lucky frivolity that seems responsible for the numerous cases of unpunctuality and lack of co-ordination. An aircraft has to wait for over five minutes for one unpunctual member of the crew; the crew waits for an armourer who is late in delivering the ammunition; Intelligence is late in providing the crew with the requisite target maps. Five minutes here, ten minutes there, and yet the outcome of a raid may depend on just those few critical minutes. As far as I can gather, outside intelligence often comes through too late to be of much avail to our bombers. Somewhere on its way the news seems to get hung up, and when it finally comes through there are too many five-minute periods wasted in the preparation of a raid to assure the punctual arrival of the planes over the target. I have no doubt that a general tightening up of discipline and a more austere attitude towards the task in hand would be of great value. Perhaps, as a novice with very little professional knowledge, I have no right to speak of these matters. But you don't have to be an expert to notice them. Moreover, several of the more experienced officers, on both the flying and the administrative sides, have admitted to me that my observations are correct.

No, my love for the R.A.F. is not blind. And perhaps just because it is so sincere, it is likewise so critical.

X

The C.O. of my squadron had been replaced by Wing Commander Richard Kellett, who returned from leave during my brief absence at home. Ever since my arrival I had heard people talking about him. He was one of our peace-time aces, but quite apart from flying fame, his personal renown appeared to be very high. Since I had been attached to 941 Squadron, he became my new chief.

Wing Commander Kellett was short and slim, and with his dark eyes, black hair, and sensitive face suggested a Latin rather than a Briton. He kept mostly to himself, was very reserved and might have belonged to the 'silent' service rather than to the far more loquacious R.A.F. There was about him none of the noisy heartiness typical of so many famous airmen, yet though courteous and rather gentle of manner, he was anything but weak, and his exemplary good manners went hand in hand with clock-work precision and efficiency. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted and was generally treated with greater respect than many of those far senior to him. He was the only man at Manhill who wore shoes with rubber soles—what a breach of etiquette!—and even on warm days appeared swathed in a huge white scarf. To the R.A.F. disciplinarian who regarded even an Air Force blue scarf as a sign of effeminacy, this soft, warm, and white object must have been a real horror. In any service, men who were famous in their job and yet succeeded in retaining their personal individuality were very rare. I could not help but admire my new C.O.

After a day's work under the armament officer and a day's tuition by the signals officer, I was supposed to accompany the squadron on firing exercises along the east coast. I had been waiting for a whole week for that opportunity, but on each occasion something had prevented either the squadron from carrying out their intention or me from joining them. But finally everything was arranged, and after having obtained permission of Windlow and Kellett, I called in the evening on the Flight Captain. 'Call here to-morrow morning before nine,' he said. Later at dinner, Steward, a Canadian with the appearance of an outsize teddy-bear, shouted to me across the table, 'You're coming to-morrow in *my* bus, baby. The Flight Captain warned me to be careful, so you're in for some real exhibition flying. Be sure to be in the crew room before nine.'

At seven next morning the fog was a thick damp blanket, but so it had been on most mornings. I called on Steward before nine. 'I guess, baby, you had better call again at ten,' he said. When I reported again an hour later he said, 'Come back at eleven; we'll probably be off by eleven-thirty.' One of the pilots saw me standing forlorn under a Wellington on the tarmac. 'Why don't you join us in the rest room?' he asked kindly.

In the rest room four of the younger pilots were standing round a table watching Steward play a game of patience. What could have been more appropriate? Patience, no doubt, headed the list of virtues most badly

required in the R.A.F. At eleven the Flight Captain 'phoned to announce that the pilots were to spend the next half-hour on the Link Trainer.

Outside the rest room the service van had been standing by ever since nine o'clock to take the various crews to their aircraft dispersed all over the aerodrome. I asked the driver to take me to the mess, where I remained waiting throughout the morning. With tantalizing regularity the fog lifted, only to descend again five minutes later and wrap the outlines of the hangars in floating wool. By lunch-time five hours of the day had been completely wasted. I began to admire our airmen for their patience even more than for their contempt of death.

Before going in to lunch I rang up flight command. Steward answered, 'Pack up, baby, holiday for the rest of the day.'

In the afternoon it cleared up and I had my fifth flying lesson. Theoretically I was always exceedingly keen on my lessons, yet when the hour approached some perverse part of myself began to hope that the lesson might not come off. Once we were in the air, however, this queer conflict was completely overcome and I wished that the flight would go on and on. Yet there were many moments when I would get the wind up, thus when Thwaites made me stall and, once, when he decided that I was sufficiently air-minded to experience a spin. When towards the end of a lesson Thwaites's voice announced, 'I think you've had enough for to-day, take over and fly back to Manhills', I experienced a genuine thrill. Somehow I managed to get the Magister back to the aerodrome and not until just before the actual landing did Thwaites take over. There was something profoundly satisfying in feeling one's way towards the mastery of a new element.

I hardly should have been able to overcome the handicaps of age, cowardly disposition, and limited gifts for all things mechanical if it had not been for Thwaites or, rather, for my relationship to him. Though he was only a youngster, I could not help meeting him with genuine respect and even admiration. His equanimity and kindness and, above all, his way of treating a man whom he inevitably regarded as belonging to a different generation on a basis of complete equality—all these had sown within me the seeds of sentiments which, had our ages been reversed, might have almost amounted to hero-worship. One day when I addressed him, as usual, as 'sir'—he was two ranks above me—and he said, 'Cut that out, R.L., we're friends', I felt more elated than I could have done if I had been awarded the D.F.C. Thwaites had become for me the personification of everything that was best in the R.A.F. and intensified even more my devotion to the service.

XI

A fortnight after I first arrived at Manhills I wrote the following letter to one of my oldest friends:

. . .

You say in your letter that you consider my enthusiasm for my new life to be a betrayal of all the principles of individualism and of the contemplative life to which I have always adhered. I will attempt to give you my reasons. Of course I could evade the main issue merely by stating that my present life represents an interesting change and that it happens to suit me. But such an answer would be very superficial; nor would it do justice to some of my most ardent beliefs of recent years.

You must admit that never before have I led so active and 'real' a life as I have during the last few weeks. You will probably retort that a contemplative and to some extent creative life such as I was fortunate enough to lead, is more real and of greater spiritual significance than my present one. My reply is that an author, however much he may try to identify himself with the questions of the moment and however anxious he may be to take part in the solving of his readers' manifold problems, views life mainly from an observation tower, even if not necessarily an ivory tower. He may be diagnostician, adviser, doctor, and father-confessor, but he is not the patient, or rather, the protagonist as well. At Manhill I am neither doctor nor judge, and have little time for observing reality, but am part of it. I myself must learn about guns or flying. It is I and not one of my readers who suffers trepidation before a flight, enjoys the exhilaration while in the air, is swayed by the waves of anxiety and hope in the Ops. Room when our squadron is on a raid. It is no longer some stranger who seeks guidance to co-ordinate and master his reactions to uncommon experiences. Tossed from one such experience to another, I cannot limit myself to observe any of them merely intellectually but every fibre in me has to find the right bearings. Is this not reality?

You may answer that it is a poor sort of reality, one that is open to any youngster with mechanical gifts, and that it contains little spiritual significance which, after all, is the ultimate standard of reality. Even if I agreed with you—as I'm not prepared to do—that there is little of true significance in the airman's life as such, there still remains the fact that in times of war his life represents spiritual reality, if only by its intensity, its completeness, and above all, its supreme relevance to what has become the one overriding reality in the existence of the nation at large. His life leaves little room for half-truths or intellectual dishonesty—reality's worst enemies. Would it not lead us into hopeless casuistry if we were to deliberate whether it is more real to ride a horse than to write about riding one? Action that at some time or other does not lead to contemplation may be of little value to the one who acts, but contemplation that is not rooted in action is even less valuable. And wisdom, which is, perhaps, nothing else but awareness of reality, wisdom comes through living life and not merely observing it.

Quite frankly, I am grateful that my present life leaves so little time for introspection. This letter and a diary which I'm trying to keep are in fact my only efforts in that direction. But they form too minute a part of my pre-occupations and are too insignificant to affect in any way my life of 'reality'.

I admit that I have always regarded individualism as one of the most

precious possessions of civilized man. But is not the subordination of the individual and of his aspirations to the common cause the only duty that really matters in war-time? Never before have I experienced real subordination and self-effacement. It was in the very nature of my job to impose my individual convictions upon others and to cultivate that which made me different from others rather than that which conformed to the conventional mould. Am I to complain that at last I have to learn the lesson of self-effacement? My gratitude for this is the more real since I was very fortunate in starting my Air Force career in an operational station and, moreover, one which has always had a particularly high renown in the service. However prejudiced my picture of the R.A.F. may be, for the time being it is the only one on which I can base my impressions. These impressions could be summed up in the terms comradeship, service, and loyalty. Having always lived within England's stable framework of tradition and family, you would probably take Manhill's sense of community—or call it team spirit if you like—for granted, but what to you is self-evident, is for me, deprived in early youth of both national and family bonds, a new and exhilarating discovery. The R.A.F. restores to me many of the opportunities and values which I was robbed of in youth and with which you were so fully provided in your own life that you were practically unconscious of their existence.

That the community to which I now belong is purely masculine would seem to give it that 'cleanliness', that something of which T. E. Lawrence was so conscious in the tents and on the battlefields of fighting Arabia. Is not that something, finally, a spiritual factor, not dissimilar from that which nourished so much in the best of Greek civilization? And this brings me to my last point. Being a member of what unquestionably represents the modern version of earlier fraternities, here for the first time in my life I find myself everyone's equal. I am not judged by what I was or wasn't before I came here, but what I make of the present. Some of my new friends are the sons of chauffeurs, farmers, or mechanics, others bear names that were famous in British history five hundred years ago. Yet they are bound together with a fine equality. I know that in many of the armed services—and no doubt in the R.A.F. as well—there is still a great deal of snobbishness and social discrimination. In an operational station, however—and I am speaking of course of the men who do the actual flying and bombing—there seems no place for either. The job is too exacting, the stakes are too high. Though I am almost twice the age of most of the Pilot Officers, I myself am a P.O., and share my meals with them, do my work among them, chat with them in our free moments, and am accepted by them as an equal. And is it not a greater privilege for a man of forty to be accepted by youths of twenty than for a youth to be admitted into the company of the middle-aged?

Are you surprised, then, that I feel grateful for having been led into the R.A.F.? In time my views upon it may—and probably will—change. But why speak of an unknown future at a moment when the present is so lavish with its riches?

XII

DIARY

Have now been initiated into every aspect of a bomber station, and though naturally I cannot claim to know much about any one department, I have at any rate gained some insight into the general work of our bomber organization in Group, Station, and Squadron. My future job—so far as I can foresee—will demand not so much the specialized knowledge of any particular branch of the R.A.F., but rather a proper perspective of the service's chief offensive branch as a whole. My experiences at Manhill have enabled me to gain more comprehensive impressions of the R.A.F. than could be attained by a specialist who would have to concentrate on his particular job. It has become a standing quip here that the C.O. and myself are 'the only two men who know what is going on at Manhill'. Most of the administrative officers have hardly ever been inside a Wellington; only few of the air crews know the work in the 'backroom'; Ops. and Intelligence officers naturally have only a vague idea of what happens in the hangars or the armoury; and so forth.

Now that the theoretical side of my instruction is supposed to have reached its end, I am trying to take an even more active part in the routine life of the aerodrome. I spend hours in the hangars watching the fitters and electricians; I drift into the armoury to 'help' clean the guns; I try to learn from the navigators plotting their course in the crew room.

When one morning I reported to the Flight Commander's office, Squadron Leader Harris said, 'I've got good news for you. We can take you on a night formation flight, a capital show, with blind flying and searchlights and all the rest. We won't be back till midnight, so have a good tea and be here by five-thirty. The West Country and Wales.' I thanked him and then went to meet Thwaites for my flying lesson.

Soon after four I went to the mess for tea. Though only an hour earlier when I had my flying lesson it had been foggy, the sky was turning gold and pink and the air was clear. 'I'm thankful it's clearing up,' I said, 'what a night for a flight.'

'Why do you let Harris take you?' the fat Ops. officer suddenly asked. Never before had he uttered a word to me and he seemed the most taciturn man at the station.

'Why?' I was genuinely amazed. 'Wouldn't you like to join us, sir?'

'I wouldn't dream of it, not if I were paid a hundred quid. I went once and, God help me, never again.'

'Why not?'

'When we returned everyone told me how lucky I was to have got back at all.'

The others at the table began to laugh. 'From the last formation flight of six machines two never returned.'

'Why are they taking you on a night formation flight?' the Ops. officer continued, without addressing his words to me in particular and as though

he were mumbling to himself. 'You don't see a ruddy thing, you don't learn anything, and there's nothing more dangerous.'

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. 'Sorry, sir, but this is rather unfair. You know how keen I am on this flight, and now everyone is trying to frighten me out of it. There is really nothing very amusing about all this leg-pulling.'

'Leg-pulling, my foot,' Linnes, my young companion of our Cambridge tour butted in. 'Listen, my lord,' he always teased me by addressing me thus, 'you'll never have to conduct the Poles on a night tour to Wales. What's the good of taking unnecessary risks? The Poles will appreciate you far more alive than dead.'

I was very fond of Linnes and I believed he liked me, so I began to wonder whether he was still joking. 'What do you really mean, Linnes?' I turned to him.

'Though you may not know it, my lord, many of the pilots to-night are green; it's their first night formation flight, and they've orders to keep as tight a formation as possible. It's more than likely that there'll be some collisions—there always are. We haven't been doing this sort of thing long enough and you'd better wait another six months. Tight formation at night in Wellingtons isn't money for jam.'

Not being by nature a hero, I began to feel disheartened and was meekly about to give in. 'Well,' I said, 'I don't mind either way. If it's really true that I shan't see a damn thing for six hours, I might as well stay away. But, quite frankly, I can't let Harris down. He's been awfully decent and seems very keen on taking me.'

'Simply say you aren't going,' Linnes replied.

'I can't do that. He'll smell at once that I've funkcd.'

This was received with shouts of laughter. 'No-one here believes in that hero stuff,' someone cried; 'we aren't Jerry. Hasn't Linnes told you that a live coward at Manhill is better than a dead hero in Wales!'

'If you insist, baby,' Steward added in his slow and dispassionate Canadian drawl, 'I swear 941 will send you a beautiful wreath.'

'That's to say, if they ever find your corpse', the fat Ops. murmured, helping himself to a third chunk of fruit cake and adding after a second, 'which they very seldom do'.

It was ten past five and quite soon I should have to walk to the hangar to get ready. I no longer minded what those with whom I was having tea happened to think of me; I mingled with them all day long and regarded most of them as friends. But I did mind Harris. He was a disciplinarian, but was always exceptionally kind to me and his invitation was in the nature of a great favour. He had spoken of the flight with real enthusiasm, and, whatever plausible excuse I might find, I simply couldn't face having to say no to him. 'Anyhow,' I said, determined to leave the room within a few minutes, 'I would rather be dead under a nice wreath from all you stinkers than enjoy your cheering company.'

'Now my lord is shooting a line', Linnes roared, but stopped when he noticed that Wing Commander Kellett, who was always among the

first at breakfast and among the last at tea and dinner, had entered the room.

He sat down next to me and began to look through his habitually large correspondence. No-one dared to pursue the argument of the night flight any further. I had little doubt that Kellett was not the sort of man to agree with the views of my companions. While fingering his letters with one hand, he was pouring out his tea with the other. Without looking up from his cup, he addressed me in his quiet, at times hardly audible voice, 'I hear, R.L., you were going with B Flight on their night exercise. Bad weather reports from South Wales—fog—the flight is off.'

None of the others could possibly have heard his words. So neither could they grasp that I had forgotten to say 'Thank you, sir'.

XIII

The evening mail brought me an invitation to attend an official luncheon in London to be given in honour of General Sikorski, the Polish Premier and Commander-in-Chief. The invitation was for two and I immediately asked Harry Thwaites whether he would care to come with me, provided we could induce the C.O. to give us twenty-four hours' leave. Harry was eager to come, and I was convinced that the brief change would do him good, so next morning after breakfast off I hustled to the C.O., who each day had to suffer my requests for this or that favour. To sway his decision I tried to make the invitation look rather more important than it really was.

'I have nothing against your going to London,' he said, kindly as ever. 'Since you'll be working with the Poles you ought to meet their Commander-in-Chief. But what has Thwaites got to do with it?'

My instinct told me that the best line to follow would be one of complete frankness. 'Well, sir,' I braced myself for my task, 'no-one at Manhill has a harder and more monotonous job than Flight Lieutenant Thwaites, and I thought it would do him good to have a little change. Moreover,' and I felt myself involuntarily blushing, 'Flight Lieutenant Thwaites has been very kind to me in giving me flying lessons every day and I should so much like to let him have this little pleasure, if you don't mind, sir.'

Group Captain Windlow laughed. 'You should have become a barrister and not an airman, R.L. Tell the adjutant that I've given you both twenty-four hours' leave. If he sends in the vouchers I'll sign them.'

'Thank you, sir.' Never had I saluted more smartly.

Early next morning we set off in Harry's car. I had 'phoned a friend in London to inquire whether we might spend the night at her house, and thither we drove to deposit our luggage. We then went to do some shopping. For me this matter of shopping was rather an important one, for it involved—a new ring on my sleeve. The previous day's *Times* had con-

tained an announcement of my promotion to temporary Flying Officer. Whatever reason may have been behind this unexpected promotion, I had no idea. But there it was black on white in the *London Gazette*. Even so I didn't quite know what to do and went to seek the long-suffering C.O.'s advice. 'Get yourself a wider ring for your sleeve', he said and when I tried to argue that even in wartime a P.O. is not likely to be promoted within less than a year, he added, 'Yours is only a wartime appointment. They've pushed you up because they probably consider that your future job will require a higher rank.' So our first destination in London was the tailor who affixed to my sleeves the symbol of my unwarranted elevation.

Harry Thwaites who had joined the R.A.F. in his teens and had had few opportunities to assist at functions such as the luncheon at the Savoy, was as eager as a small boy at his first pantomime, and I had to point out to him every 'celebrity' whose features I was able to identify. Like everyone in the service, he appreciated few things more than the temporary comforts of civilian life, and the routine and peacetime atmosphere in my friend's house evoked his undisguised enthusiasm.

After our return on the following day, the first person I met in the mess was Wing Commander Elliott, a charming Irishman who had an important job at H.Q. 'I'm sorry to hear we're losing you,' he greeted me. My blank expression made him add, 'A signal has just arrived announcing that you're being posted to some other station', and when he noticed the consternation on my face, he said cheerfully. 'Well, it was bound to come. Wasn't it?'

Indeed, for the last few days I had been expecting to be posted elsewhere, yet once the die was cast I realized more than ever how deeply attached I was to Manhill. It was only during the last week that I had really become part of the place, so that my name was remembered by everyone and jokes were cracked at my expense. In Harry I was just beginning to make a real friend. Well, there it was, and however wretched I might feel, it was no use letting personal sentiments affect what, after all, I had deliberately set out to make a real war job and not merely a holiday in the company of new friends.

I spent most of the day packing and rushing from section to section getting my clearance chits and trying to keep pace with the red tape which I now found even at Manhill. In the evening I was informed that a new signal had just arrived stating that my new destination was to be Bentley. To most people at Manhill, Bentley appeared to be something of a mystery. It housed a new experimental centre for air-gunnery which was supposed to be a completely unorthodox venture in the R.A.F. 'Bentley should be an interesting experience', everyone told me, trying to cheer me up.

To get down to Bentley by train would have taken me a full day. So I asked the C.O. before dinner whether there was a chance of my going there by plane. In his usual generosity he immediately suggested that

Harry should take me in the Mag. This, incidentally, would enable me to have a last flying lesson. But during dinner I heard that a pilot of 00 Squadron was to ferry a Wellington to Bentley and would be able to give me a lift.

XIV

On my last day at Manhill I got up before six and was on the tarmac by seven, which was my appointed time with O'Maley, the pilot who for the last two days had been waiting for the weather to improve so that he might take his Wellington to Bentley. But the latest weather reports from the south were still hopeless and O'Maley couldn't obtain permission to fly. He was an Irishman born in South America, with a raven-black mop of hair falling artistically over one eye. He spoke English with a Spanish accent and seemed completely crazy. He wouldn't mind taking off in a fog and without anybody's permission. On his visits to our mess he either drank, played Chopin and Debussy on the piano, or sat by himself in a corner wrapped in profound melancholy.

When I called on him again at nine, I discovered that he was the only pilot and I the only member of the 'crew'. This surprised me greatly, since one of the regulations I had been taught at Manhill stipulated that no Wellington was allowed to take off without both a first and second pilot. Not only O'Maley himself but even I might get into a pretty mess if we offended against so cardinal a rule. After several weeks' instruction I could no longer claim ignorance of the existing flying laws. But O'Maley was not the type with whom to start an argument just before a flight.

Group Captain Windlow had asked me to call on him to say good-bye, so I mentioned the situation to him. Never before had I seen the cheerful and composed C.O. lose his temper. 'Who the hell has allowed you two beggars to take off by yourselves?' he cried. 'I'll have you both court-martialled. Put me through to the C.O. of 00 Squadron,' he shouted into his telephone. 'I say, Wilson, do you want us all to be kicked out of the service? Do you realize that if a Wellington crashes and it's found out that it took off without a second pilot, we shall all be court-martialled? What? You've given your boys permission to fly without a second pilot? Well, the sooner this is stopped the better. We'll have a word about that later. But now listen. One of my officers is going with one of your pilots to Bentley. Will you send a second pilot immediately? Run to the aircraft,' he turned to me, 'and tell that crazy Irishman to wait.'

When I reached the aircraft O'Maley was waiting impatiently. The engines were switched on and the propellers were turning. The weather report from Bentley announced an improvement in general conditions with visibility two miles, but slowly deteriorating. If we took off immediately we might just make it. Nevertheless I had to tell him of the C.O.'s decision.

'What the bloody hell have you been up to?' His face was flushed with anger and the mop of hair now covered even his second eye.

'Sorry, old man, I couldn't help it.'

'Why the blazes did you have to tell the old man anything? He knows nothing about Wellingtons, and what business is it of yours?' For a minute or two he continued to race at top speed through the juicy vocabulary of combined Spanish and R.A.F. invectives. Obviously the wisest thing to do was to remain silent. Yet I was even more annoyed than he, for I was impatient to start my work at Bentley (for which the Air Ministry would no doubt have allocated only the minimum of time) and it was now too late for a journey by train.

When we telephoned to Grazefield half an hour later, we were told that the second pilot had only just left. 'To blazes with these eternal transport delays which hang everything up', O'Maley swore, and for several minutes we both tried to soothe ourselves by blaming R.A.F. transport for every misadventure that had ever befallen the Air Force. Eventually at eleven-thirty the van with the second pilot arrived. He brought with him three parachutes. This was lucky, for O'Maley had of course been above thinking of such details. Within a few minutes we were off.

We left at eleven-forty; went over Cambridge, Oxford, Bath, and Salisbury and by twelve-fifty could distinguish Exmoor. We should be at Bentley for a latish lunch. By train this journey would have taken me more than ten hours. But suddenly untidy rags of fog came drifting thicker and thicker, and within less than a minute they formed themselves into an enormous blanket that obliterated the entire landscape. O'Maley asked me to leave the seat by his side to make room for the second pilot who up till then had been acting as navigator. I could see from O'Maley's worried face that he wasn't quite sure of himself. I doubted whether before leaving he had swung the compass or thought it necessary to plot the course. We were lucky that the fog hadn't come up earlier on our journey. Even so I congratulated myself on having talked to the C.O.

Soon after one o'clock holes appeared in the fog, but all we could distinguish was the sea underneath. None of us knew exactly where we were, and I had the feeling that we were flying in the wrong direction and away from the land. Yes, we had been flying due south all the time and were surrounded on all sides by the sea. So, once again, O'Maley turned towards the coast.


Every now and again I could catch a glimpse of the land as it appeared and disappeared under low white clouds. We were flying less than 200 feet high, trying to get near but not too near the land. For the cliffs were high, and every few seconds clouds and fog became so thick that we could see nothing but a ghostly whiteness. O'Maley decided to turn slightly towards the sea, but once again he changed his tactics and flew parallel with the coastline. Every now and again we could just distinguish the cliffs through swiftly moving windows in the fog.

The second pilot shouted into my ear. We should have to do a forced

landing. It was impossible to get through to Bentley and our wireless was out of order, so we couldn't get in touch with the aerodrome to ask for someone to be sent up to show us the way. Anyhow O'Maley had forgotten to have the tanks filled and we had only got enough petrol for another few minutes. The fog was lifting once again, but we had moved eastwards from the high cliffs, and were flying only a few feet above the ground. Below us was a large flat field, ideal for landing. We rose again and circled once or twice above it. O'Maley closed the throttle and we glided down. Should we make it? It had become incredibly quiet in the plane and I heard the second pilot saying, 'What luck, this seems to be the civil aerodrome at Lyndhurst; I've been here before the war.' At that moment the Wellington touched the ground, bumped once or twice, moved on slowly, sank slightly into the mud and then stopped.

It was pouring hard when we landed, and the whole airfield had turned into a quagmire. It was beyond me how they would ever get the aircraft out of that dirty porridge. But near by there was the aerodrome's clubhouse and we were able to get some lunch. We rang up Bentley and were promised transport within the hour.

After we had settled down to lunch O'Maley spoke to me for the first time since our journey through the fog. 'I'm glad, R.L., you went to see the C.O. this morning. I don't think I could have done it without a navigator. This is one up to you, you son of a bitch.' And he instantly asked me to lend him a pound.



Chapter Two

BENTLEY

I

When we reached Bentley it was time for tea. Nevertheless I reported to the adjutant at once. But the signal from the Air Ministry had not come through yet and the adjutant knew nothing about my being posted to Bentley. I carried with me a personal letter from Group Captain Windlow to the C.O., but since the latter was away, once again I had to start my duties by waiting.

Though I was the oldest P.O. at Manhill I was never in the least conscious of my rank, for both the senior and junior officers treated me alike and questions of rank never entered into personal relationships. At Bentley, however, I noticed that before speaking to me everyone first scrutinized the ring on my sleeves. They probably expected to find at least the three rings of a Wing Commander, and were surprised by the solitary one of a Flying Officer. Quite unconsciously I soon adopted the method prevalent among Bentley's junior officers who, when first addressed, would bury their hands well in their trousers pockets to hide the revealing ring.

In the morning I reported to the C.O., a jovial-looking gentleman with the manner and fresh complexion of a seaman. Details of my posting not having come through, he naturally knew nothing about my duties. But after I had delivered Group Captain Windlow's private letter, his manner changed and his bored indifference gave place to eagerness. (I felt a little sorry for these commanding officers, experts in their clearly defined jobs and accustomed to a strict R.A.F. routine, when they found themselves suddenly confronted with a white elephant for whose functions, nay, very existence, there was no precedent in the service. After all, the Polish Air Force was the only one which, overwhelmed by the Hun, was to be reborn on foreign soil and, as it happened, in Britain. Thus there appeared to exist no other post quite like mine within the entire R.A.F. In consequence it was left to the unfortunate C.O. to evolve the right method to treat the elephant.)

The C.O. wasted no time in ringing up this or that department of the Air Ministry for instructions or in looking up King's Regulations or other works of reference—how a German C.O. in similar circumstances would have plunged into any or all of these!—but instantly made up his mind. 'I'll put you into the hands of Flight Sergeant Ross, our best instructor, the man is worth his weight in gold. And we'll ask Wing Commander

Harewood to prepare a syllabus for you.' Both the Flight Sergeant and the Wing Commander—in that order—were rung up, and within a quarter of an hour I met my new mentor, an N.C.O. with twenty years' service in the R.A.F.

I spent the rest of the morning with Flight Sergeant Ross to gain an impression of the various activities of Bentley in general and of my own future ones in particular. Though the aerodrome was crammed with the most miscellaneous assortment of aircraft, from outdated biplanes and dissipated-looking Demons to Battles, Blenheims, and Spitfires, and from antiquated Harrows to the latest Wellingtons, the true purpose of Bentley was symbolized not so much by aeroplanes but rather by machine-guns, bomb-sights, and gun turrets, in short, everything to do with firing and killing.

DIARY

Went for a walk before dinner. Left the station buildings behind and turned towards the aerodrome, surrounded in the further distance by hills. The rain had stopped during the afternoon, and in a cloudless sky lavishly sprinkled with stars a new moon was shining brightly. The air was warm and of an almost luminous clarity. With their wings spread out hugely against the pallid sky, the aircraft formed silhouettes like those of some prehistoric bird. Not a sound or soul could be heard or seen. I hadn't experienced such tranquil beauty since my days in Sussex before I joined up. The last few weeks have been full of work, people, and high tension, and under the impact of this sudden revocation of a world at peace the inner chemistry of the mind brought to the fore reactions and thoughts that for weeks had lain buried under a half-forgotten yesterday. They were banal and obvious thoughts, yet they startled me by their essentially civilian nature. Was it possible to believe, asked the particles of the mind that came floating up from the past, that each one of these silently resting birds served the one and only purpose of carrying kind-hearted youths to drop bombs of misery and destruction upon men and women as they slept in their beds, enjoyed their meals, or worked at their benches? There seemed something incongruous, almost sacrilegious in the close proximity of a pale sky expanding peacefully, and the dark shadows, immobile, winged and pregnant with death. But the reactions which the vision of peace and the remembrance of things past had suddenly conjured up, dissolved as quickly as they had come, and a minute later I judged them merely foolish and sentimental. The world of the last few weeks proved stronger than the traditions of a lifetime.

II

From the moment I arrived at Bentley I seemed to miss something. After two days I knew what that something was: it was the sense of comradeship and unity of purpose that had made of Manhill so elating an experience. Throughout my time there I had always been conscious of

belonging to a fraternity, a brotherhood with but a single aim and in which all individual ambitions, after having undergone purification, had been raised to a level far higher and more impersonal than before. At Bentley, on the other hand, the officers seemed to be separate entities with no comprehensive unifying aim. There existed of course reasons inherent in the very nature of the station that were responsible for that fundamental difference. At Bentley people worked together for a few weeks and then departed to their permanent units that claimed all their loyalties. But even among those who belonged there permanently, the instructors, station pilots, administrative and similar officers, there seemed little of the spirit which at Manhill was born of the very purpose of the place. The stakes for which an operational station lived were far higher than those of a station in which the war was not factually experienced but merely reflected. For men in uniform war is a cleansing process. Merely playing at war and theorizing about it—however inevitable during the stage of preparation—can have undesirable effects. But Bentley was little more than a railway junction at which the travellers stopped for a short while on their way to adventure and to the final consummation of what they had garnered during their travels. It would have been unfair to expect there, even in the minor details of conduct, the standards that were self-understood at Manhill. Up there you would not have dreamt of entering the anteroom in a greatcoat or with your cap on. At Bentley, officers did both, and at times the anteroom assumed the appearance of a public bar rather than of the mess sanctum that it was supposed to be. On my first afternoon I had something of a shock when I discovered one of the officers lounging in an easy-chair wearing his bedroom slippers.

It fitted perhaps into the general picture of my new home that whereas Manhill's C.O., Windlow, smart, dapper, wiry, and keen, seemed an appropriate symbol of the R.A.F., the C.O. at Bentley, kindly, fat, and slow, suggested nothing of the sort. It seemed to fit equally into the picture that whereas Windlow, though not living in the mess, was to be seen in the anteroom every night and many times during the day, my new C.O., who actually did live in the mess, hardly ever appeared to spend his evenings in the anteroom.

I could not help regarding one of the admin. officers, called without any obvious reason the 'doctor', as symbolical of the dissimilarities between the two stations. I may have been unfair, but he gave me the impression of being as antagonistic to soap as he was partial to other people's hospitality. Whenever someone within easy distance pulled out his cigarette case, the 'doctor' was there, ready to be offered a gratuitous smoke. I noticed that he carried his own matches, yet I never saw him use them. Instead he accosted others, even those who did not happen to be smoking at the time, and asked for a light. The moment you heard what appeared to be a stock phrase at Bentley, 'I don't know what about your tongue, but my tongue is hanging out for a drink', the doc. was there waiting to satisfy his own

tongue at the expense of someone else. It spoke very highly of the patient good nature of Bentley that the doc.'s blatant manœuvres were accepted ungrudgingly and with good humour.

The feature that did not fit at all into the picture of Bentley's mess was the food, for which not an officer was responsible but a professional steward who in peace-time had owned a hotel in France, and who evidently was a master of his craft. No London restaurant could boast of a greater or more appetizing variety of excellent meat dishes, salads, sweets, and even cheeses, and three enormous bowls of Devonshire cream invariably adorned the sideboard. The doc. was both the first and the last at meals, and it was a miracle to me how he managed to store such enormous quantities of food within the narrow compass of his anatomy.

My first few days were crammed with lessons on bomb-sights, machine-guns, and elementary navigation, and my brain fairly reeled with trigger mechanisms, computed speeds, and true courses, and my room was littered with Air Force manuals and scraps of paper covered with notes. Though my betters seemed to consider that theory was the sole fare on which I should be nourished, I was determined to go through most of the training of a regular air-gunner. After having had firing practice from stationary turrets, I pestered everyone to let me join the air-gunners firing from the air. Finally the officer in command of air-firing asked me to call on him at his office. 'Listen, R.L.,' he addressed me when I reported to him, 'I have no wish to make things difficult for you, but do you know anything about firing? I don't want you suddenly to fire into the streets of L—— or at the plane that carries the drogue.' I laughed but he added, 'We've had this sort of thing happen and must be on our guard.' When I assured him that there were limits even to the follies of a civilian animal parading in Air Force uniform, he consented to let me join the air-gunners.

Within twenty minutes I found myself inside a huge Harrow taking up the four best air-gunners of the station. Before the aircraft reached the sea, the five of us were sitting on the floor inside the vast belly of the plane, each waiting his turn in one of the two gun turrets. Having never before flown in such a turret, I was wondering what the sensation inside would be like. The rear turret to which I had been assigned was situated at the very end of the extremely long fuselage and would obviously swing about more than any of its other sections. Shall I get sick? I repeated to myself, hoping that none of my colleagues would guess the nature of my meditations. But instead of bothering about my state of mind, they set out to give me useful tips for my forthcoming experience. When finally my turn came, I somehow managed to reach the rear turret and to squeeze into it. Once there, the sensation proved strange indeed. You no longer felt that you belonged to the plane which was completely obliterated from your view. Whichever way you swung the turret and yourself in it, you never

caught as much as a glimpse of the aircraft. The glass walls of the turret hardly seemed to separate you from the surrounding space at all, and you felt as though you were flying not in an aeroplane but just in a magic glass cage unattached to anything. My former fears about the motion inside the turret proved superfluous, for in my eagerness to do a dozen different things correctly I forgot everything unrelated to them.

Unfortunately my gun jammed from the very first moment, and the only way to make it fire—my knowledge of clearing stoppages being as yet rudimentary—was for an extremely helpful armourer who suddenly appeared behind me in the fuselage, to pull the trigger whenever I gave him the order. But this de luxe manner of firing was rather unsatisfactory, for my own function was reduced to aiming at the drogue and holding the target long enough in my sight for the armourer to do the rest. In my excitement I didn't notice that within a few minutes my two hundred rounds of ammunition had gone and it was time for me to leave the turret.

When I rejoined my four fellow-travellers, they were eager to clarify for me some of the many mysteries that had confronted me during my brief experience in the turret. It was only then that I recognized two of my companions. A few weeks previously I had seen them during my medical examination at the Air Ministry. But our mutual recognition made me feel embarrassed, for they had been in the Air Force for over a year, had been on operations, and were the pride of Bentley where they were attending a refresher course, and yet were still sergeants, whereas I, with only the most elementary Air Force knowledge, had a commission and had to be addressed by them as 'sir'. But their complete unselfconsciousness and kindness soon put me at ease. It was a gratifying sensation to be accepted by them as a colleague, and the difference in rank seemed to amount to nothing by the time we landed. On my way to the mess for tea, I felt as though in the course of the afternoon I had made a substantial advance on the road to becoming a member of the R.A.F. in something more than name.

After my first experience in the gun turret I began to wonder whether I too was going to fall a victim to the fascination of mechanical toys, for I found myself completely under the spell of the new sensation of looking through the gunsight. You pressed your eye to the black metal case which enclosed the actual sight, and in it, and yet as though suspended in the atmosphere outside, appeared four golden lines with a shining gold bead in the centre. In fact this vision of gold light was held in a piece of crystal, but since you were not aware of the crystal, all you saw was the lighted image held by the air, an image which wandered through space as you desired and as directed by the movement of your hands gripping the gun handles. Flight Sergeant Ross had explained to me in scholarly terms how the illuminated mirage was produced and had given me many scientific details. Yet for the time being all those important data seemed rather irrelevant to me, and I preferred basking in romantic ignorance of the mystery behind the beautiful phenomenon.

III

One morning I called on Wing Commander Spense, the brightest light of Bentley. He was a brilliant theorist and alleged to be one of the leading experts on the science of tracer. He promised to give me a short lesson on this at the time fairly unexplored and complicated weapon.

Since the quarters of the station were as yet unfinished, small, and crammed, even the most senior instructors had to share rooms. And these were little more than cubicles ten feet long. I met Spense at the appointed time and we went together into his office. But later on I wished I could have avoided being present at the scene which took place. Spense's roommate was Wing Commander Jolly, another of the senior instructors. I felt greatly indebted to him for, when upon my arrival at Bentley I discovered that my luggage had gone astray, it was he who had lent me pyjamas and shaving things. Altogether he had been particularly kind.

Jolly was sitting at his writing-table smoking a cigar and the air in the room was blue and heavy. Both Spense and Jolly were in their early thirties, both happened to be fair-haired, blue-eyed, good-looking, public school and Cranwell trained.

'Will you kindly leave my room?' Spense addressed his friend in his impersonal and slightly pedantic manner. 'I've promised to give this officer a lesson and wish to be undisturbed.'

'Who the hell do you think you are, kicking me out of my room?' Jolly blew up. 'This is my room as much as yours.' Had he been drinking so early in the morning, I wondered.

'I wish to talk to this officer, so you had better clear out,' Spense's voice remained pedantic and impersonal.

'What the hell is the matter with you? I tell you this is my room as much as yours. I won't be ordered about by a bloody bastard like you.' Jolly's face had turned the colour of a lobster, whereas Spense's was getting paler every moment.

'Shut up, you idiot', he replied, evidently forcing himself not to raise his voice. 'I'll get the question of this room settled once and for all, so that I needn't share it with an ill-bred drunkard. But now, clear out.'

'I wouldn't sit in a room with a ruddy swine like you if I were asked to. You'd better learn manners and apologize.' Jolly got up, put on his great-coat with slow deliberation and walked out, slamming the door. Spense's face was now the colour of a sheet of paper. 'The theory of tracer', he turned towards me and, opening his case and offering me a cigarette, began to give me my lesson.

After lunch I was back in Spense's room for another lesson. While we were both bending over a diagram he had just drawn, Jolly came in. 'By the way,' he turned to Spense, 'I'm sorry old man, for being so bloody rude this morning. Never meant it.'

'Okay, old man. Never thought you did.'

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Once again it was the flying that compensated for whatever blemishes human nature had revealed. After my lesson with Spense I was taken up in a Wellington to watch air-gunners do loading drill. The sky was vast and blue and the countryside underneath was of different browns, greens, fawns, and reds, all mellowed by the blueness of the air. We flew for nearly two hours across Devon, Cornwall, Somerset, and Dorset, and when we landed it was time for my flying lesson.

Though my Flight Sergeant did not leave me much spare time, I was doing my best to continue my flying lessons and had obtained the C.O.'s permission to do so. Unfortunately my flying was particularly poor; few of my turns were clean; the nose of the Magister would go either far above or below the horizon; I banked too sharply, my course was seldom straight, and when it came to stalling, my instructor had to take over the controls. But the sun was shining, the air was invigorating, and, notwithstanding my incompetence, I enjoyed every moment of the flight. When we came down I felt blissfully tired physically, and tea had rarely been a more enjoyable meal.

IV

Even more than at Manhill I found myself coming up against examples of service slackness which I supposed struck anyone not yet blinded by routine. I was not the only one to find that in several instances the machine-guns in the aircraft jammed with the very first shot. Both instructors and pupils complained of the lackadaisical manner in which the armourers treated the guns. Many of the pupils grumbled—possibly with the exaggeration common to most novices—about being taken up without having been shown anything about the safety devices inside a plane. In case of fire on board or some other need for a parachute descent they would not know what to do. They also complained that they were being taken up by pilots who had never before flown that particular type of aircraft. Time-tables were being prepared without anyone ascertaining beforehand whether they could be maintained and, in consequence, many of the planned exercises could not be put into effect. On several occasions we were sent up for turret practice, and once in the air, found that the hydraulic system was out of order. On another occasion when we went up to learn about inter-com., we discovered that the earpieces with which we had been provided were of the wrong type. When next day we went up to practise R.T. the plane proved not to have been wired for it. Countless valuable hours were wasted through lack of co-ordination between those responsible for the aircraft carrying the drogue and the aircraft flying the air-gunners. You flew out to the rendezvous over the seashore, a meeting place clearly defined within the space of half a mile or so, and then circled about for a quarter of an hour waiting for the towing plane which was either late or didn't appear at all. The number of flights for each pupil was naturally limited and, in consequence, he would not receive even the minimum of flying hours required for his training.

There no doubt existed many good reasons for all these shortcomings: insufficiently trained armourers and electricians, the rapid expansion of the R.A.F. in general, old and unreliable planes that should really have been discarded long before the war, but, *force majeure*, had to continue being in use, defective guns that could not be replaced by newer ones more urgently needed in operational squadrons. Yet when all was said, the fact remained that with stricter discipline, less easy-going nonchalance and a more determined effort to achieve co-ordination, at least the deficiencies due to the human element could have been eliminated.

Then there was the question of the spirit prevailing. I am referring to the old hands, especially the all-powerful administrative officers and also to the older instructors. For many of them the R.A.F. seemed to be nothing but a career and their main concern appeared to be how to secure cushy jobs. The war left them indifferent and the one thing they tried to avoid was having to fight. This was so different from Manhill that I was driven to the conclusion that whilst an operational station was wholesome to the morale, a training centre produced no such effect. Both Manhill and Bentley may have been exceptional, of course. Nevertheless I had the impression that if my judgement were wrong it was so only in respect to the degree of the difference but not to the difference itself. Fortunately the enthusiasm both of the pupils and the younger instructors was unaffected by the spirit of the older brigade. Yet was not the 'cleansing' of that brigade an imperative necessity?

DIARY

For the second day in succession I find myself tempted to indulge in generalizations, to-day, moreover, in those concerning national characteristics—surely among the most dangerous for anyone to attempt. Yet both here and at Manhill I've noticed certain traits that impressed me as more or less common to the representatives of our various Dominions.

All the Canadians I've met so far in the R.A.F. have seemed pretty rough-hewn. Physically, most of them seem bigger than our own men; intellectually they are like youngsters in their teens. They are voracious drinkers, have a strong sense, not of humour but of fun, an indefatigable zest for cracking jokes and making puns, and they display a good-natured aggressiveness. They alone will sit with their feet on the mantelpiece, and they more than any of their cousins from the Empire correspond to the movie-sponsored picture of the modern air-fighter, cynical and hard-boiled but at heart kind and childlike.

The South Africans often seem rather like fishes out of water in an English mess. However long they may have been in this country and in the R.A.F., something Dutch, civilian, and bourgeois clings to them. There is little romance of the movie kind about them, and even the youngest often show the sedateness of middle age. They do all the right things, are painstaking and exceptionally keen on their work, but there seems little spontaneity in their deliberate and slow methods of action. In the mess they are more careful with their money than anyone else and you seldom see them

drink. When they are by themselves they usually converse in Afrikaans, and I occasionally feel that there is something secretive about them. But it may be that they are merely more suspicious and reserved than most young men and that for that reason they are not easy mixers and prefer to form themselves into a separate national group.

The most human and the easiest to get on with are the Australians, and even more so, the New Zealanders. It is difficult not to succumb to their charm, the secret of which would appear to consist of simplicity, naturalness, and manliness. I am saying all this in spite of the many tales I've heard of their toughness and rowdiness which, so far, have either escaped me or have been completely outweighed by their more attractive traits. Their physical features—I don't know what gremlins have pushed me into this anthropological mood to-day—and their predominantly light grey-blue eyes and fair hair seem appropriate vehicles of expression for these unsophisticated and boyish characters. They are the most modest among all the airmen, and I always feel happy after having spent an hour or so in their company.

V

On Sunday and after two days of almost incessant rain, practically all activities came to a standstill. I spent most of Sunday morning indoors with Flight Sergeant Ross, working on bombing theory and most of the remaining day, like everyone else, in the anteroom. The entire company was browned off, and whereas before lunch there was still a semblance of life and conversation, the afternoon was given to unmitigated drowsiness. The smoke and stuffiness, the cigarette ash strewn all over the place and the puddles of beer spilled over tables and chairs, made the anteroom unbearable. Yet despite its depressing atmosphere, the room had a strangely hypnotic effect about it. You hated the place, yet felt unable to tear yourself away from it. No-one had the will-power to get up, smash the dirty beer glasses, and kick the soiled Sunday papers and magazines aside or do something equally sensible.

I suggested to a Canadian that he might come for a walk with me, but he refused, saying he was going to play bridge. When after an hour I returned to the mess and asked the Canadian, listlessly submerged in his chair, whether he had had a good game, he replied with a yawn, 'I guess I've fallen asleep, I didn't play after all'. After tea I asked a young pilot whom I knew to be a keen chess player whether he would give me a game. He excused himself because he had just decided to play squash. So I went for a second walk. When I returned an hour later my friend, like everyone else, was still drowsing in his chair as I had left him.

Monday greeted us with torrential rain and a wind of sixty miles per hour. All flying was impossible and in consequence the atmosphere of the mess became more suicidal than ever. However devoted the pilots may have been to their drinks and their nights out at the neighbouring towns, after a few days without flying life became unredeemed misery for them.

Around twelve o'clock the wind dropped to twenty miles, the rain stopped, and the slate-coloured sky with dirty clouds racing across it became streaked with bands of china blue. Immediately after lunch flying would be resumed. The anteroom, heavy with smoke and irritability, was transformed into a beehive. Young men whose faces an hour earlier had been sullen and listless, became keen, their whole bearing alive with determination, their lips set. They were hurrying to the dining-room to get through with luncheon as quickly as possible. It was a real joy to watch the general transfiguration, both mental and physical. The atmosphere which for over two days had been inimical became full of the joyous promise of things to come.

Flying was to start at 1 p.m., and there seemed some prospect of my being taken on the very first flight, so before one o'clock I was on my way to the flight office situated in a tent at the edge of the aerodrome. To prevent the only available table and chair in the 'office' from disappearing altogether in the mud, they had been placed on a couple of old orange boxes. The place was littered with flying suits, harness, flying helmets, and log books. A dozen pilots, whom only a few minutes previously I had seen in the mess, were already assembled, showing off their most perfect manners, smiling sweetly and trying to ingratiate themselves with the Flight Commander who would decide who was to be sent up. They looked to me rather like a bevy of amorous boys circling round their favourite movie star. They were fastening their parachute harness long before their hopes of a possible flight were likely to materialize, as though their preparedness might have the power to hypnotize the Flight Commander into selecting them for the first flight. Once again, life was worth living and there was meaning in it.

VI

At times I was beginning to wonder if a kind of cussedness was not going to prevent me from going through a training that would enable me to take part in actual warfare. Of course fighting was hardly the true aim of my apprenticeship, but having begun to accumulate the knowledge of an air-gunner, I discovered, not without surprise, that I was slowly developing ambitions in that direction. Anyhow, I did not feel that I wished my knowledge to remain mere theoretical ballast. However unmartial, not to say pacifist, my past may have been, air-gunnery had strangely fascinated me from the very first day, far more so than the job of a pilot or observer. Having gone thus far, I was keener than ever to become proficient in that particular art. Yet often when it came to the test, I did not seem able to go through my firing as satisfactorily as did most. On my first flight it was the gun that jammed; on subsequent flights either the towing aircraft never appeared or a torrential rain would suddenly descend, obliterating the drogue completely and forcing us to fly back to the aerodrome. On the afternoon following the two days' rain I went up in a Harrow. The guns were new, my magazine in perfect order

and when I fired a few test shots, everything went like clockwork. I was burning with anticipation. Yet the towing plane kept far behind us all the time, or my pilot, being inexperienced, was unable to adjust his own speed to that of the towing plane, so that the drogue remained outside firing range, and I returned to the aerodrome with my ammunition practically unused. Was there anything fundamentally wrong about my desire to equal the ordinary air-gunner? I wondered. It might of course have been purely a series of minor accidents, but they repeated themselves with such exasperating frequency that I was beginning to suspect some unfair tricks on the part of fate.

VII

Before my course came to an end I notified Air Marshal Corring of the date when my training at Bentley would finish, so as to enable those responsible for my movements to do their planning accordingly. Yet even after I had exhausted my syllabus no news from the Air Ministry came through and I was beginning to kick my heels. Finally, our H.Q. sent a signal to Corring himself, but it was ignored, and I knew less than ever what to do. The C.O. admitted that it would be difficult to extend my course or to spare Flight Sergeant Ross any longer, who was required for other duties. Impatient to get down to whatever work was planned for me, I finally rang up Manhill to ask Group Captain Windlow's advice. He suggested that I should go up to London to the Air Ministry, and the C.O. at Bentley gave me permission to start early next morning.

I left Bentley at five, got to the Ministry soon after ten, and called on the officer to whom Group Captain Windlow had recommended me. 'We sent off a signal about your posting last night,' he said. 'You're going to an advanced Gunnery School.' This was surprising as I had just been on a gunnery course. Did the Air Ministry want to train me as an air-gunner?

Once within the sanctum, and as yet little touched by the spirit of service routine and precedence, I was determined to find out more about my final duties from Corring himself. So far, I had been kept pretty much in the dark about them. Liaison with the Polish Air Force—what did that really amount to?

Air Marshal Corring had been in conference ever since eight o'clock. But at eleven I was finally shown into his office, an impressive room with an enormous writing-table and a minute camp bed in one corner.

'Your name has often come up lately,' the Air Marshal greeted me, 'and I'm glad to meet you in person.' He had intensely blue eyes and a tired look. Like everyone else I had seen at the Ministry so far, he appeared overworked. 'We very much appreciate your having volunteered to help us. Would you like to know anything in particular?'

'Yes, sir, about my final duties. What should I concentrate on during my forthcoming gunnery course?'

'Gunnery course?' He raised his eyebrows.

'That's what I have just been told, sir.'

'That's a mistake. You're going to start your proper job straight away. We are giving over Sleethole to the Polish Air Force and you will be there as the British Commanding Officer's right-hand man. Help him to organize the show; make yourself useful in the administration, helping both Group Captain Milder and the Poles, in fact, in everything. You'll have a lot to do, I'm afraid. But I gather you don't mind work.'

'No, sir. Shall I be able to continue my flying lessons?'

'I'm afraid that's out of the question—for various reasons.'

Though his last answer was disappointing, I was thankful that my actual job appeared to be materializing at last, and I was greatly impressed by the simplicity and humanity of the man to whom I owed my presence in the R.A.F.

Book Two

THE POLISH ADVENTURE

Chapter One

THE SPIRIT OF SLEETHOLE

I

I got back from London to Bentley in the late evening and spent the following morning trudging along the usual miles of red tape. Once again I was sorry to leave, for I was just beginning to make a few friends and had learned to be fond of Bentley. Obviously I yet had to learn that service life meant constant good-byes and was a ruthless enemy of private sentiments.

Since the direct route from Bentley to Sleethole led through P——, I obtained permission to stop at home for the night. This time Stoughton no longer seemed so distant and unreal. I was grateful for the night at home, once again with the dogs, but the joy was brief for I had to leave early in the morning, by car. I had not driven a car since I first joined up, but never had I driven more carefully than on my way to Sleethole, for all the time I was contemplating how dreadful it would be to have an accident just when the real work was about to begin. I was never afraid of a crash while flying: to be killed in the air seemed more or less legitimate. But to be killed in a train or motor accident—the very idea seemed unbearable. Moreover, aeroplanes more than anything else had helped me to overcome my original sense of physical fear, and they were the only type of machinery that I had come to regard as something of a friend. An aeroplane would certainly seem more appropriate for the step into the final abyss than a superannuated Baby Austin.

I reached Sleethole an hour before lunch. The huge aerodrome looked desolate, the flat land bleak, almost forbidding. No trees, hardly any signs of human habitation. Even the Thames Estuary in the far distance stretched out grey and deserted. A raw north-east wind whipped the fields and unwashed rags of cloud scurried across a mud-coloured sky.

I reported to the only officer present at H.Q. who, needless to say, knew nothing about me. I asked whether I might call on the C.O., but he replied that that was out of the question. When I mentioned that I had instructions immediately to report to him the Squadron Leader raised his voice, 'From now you'll have to do as I tell you. You don't seem to know much about R.A.F. discipline.'

This was a promising beginning; so without saying a word I left H.Q. and drove on to the mess, a huge, untidy-looking building, which brought to my mind early childhood recollections of army barracks seen on a visit to Tsarist Russia. A few seagulls were wheeling in from the river, mewing their plaint over the silent building.

Inside the mess, in a long and half-bare dining-room, some ten middle-aged and somewhat motheaten-looking officers were eating an unappetizing lunch. They were waited upon by two ancient civilian waiters in linen coats which in the past might have been white but in the course of time had acquired the same grey-brown patina that covered their wearers' hands. I shuddered inwardly at the depressing sight and after introducing myself, sat down to the meal.

After lunch Group Captain Milder came into the mess. He looked surprisingly young and had a civilized and well-groomed appearance. He made me think of a smart young squire who by accident had drifted into a jumble sale in a disused barn. In the depressing surroundings of the mess and among the unkempt-looking officers with their not over-military bearing, he seemed utterly out of place. But I got something of a shock when he told me that he knew nothing about my functions at Sleethole and had never heard of me before that very day. He asked me, however, to call on him at H.Q. in an hour's time.

It might not have been surprising that no-one knew anything about my posting at Manhill or Bentley; but at Sleethole the situation was fundamentally different. It was for the sake of Sleethole that I had been called into the R.A.F. and given a commission; and had received my training. And it was to assist Group Captain Milder as his 'right-hand man' that I had been dispatched there by one of the senior officers in the R.A.F. After all, I felt entitled to expect that my chief would at any rate know as much about my future functions as the King had done.

'I'm afraid,' the C.O. greeted me when I arrived at his office, 'I don't quite know what you're expected to do here.'

'But didn't you receive a letter from Air Marshal Corring, sir?'

'Yes, I did. But the letter only mentions who you are; it doesn't say what your duties are to be.'

I did not feel that I could very well repeat the previous day's conversation in London and tell my new chief that the Air Ministry had appointed me to be his 'right-hand man'. To get round the difficulty and yet clarify my position, I used the less ambitious term A.D.C. But to this Group Captain Milder merely replied, 'No-one below the rank of Air Commodore has an A.D.C. There must be a mistake somewhere. I know very little about Air Marshal Corring or about his connection with the Polish Air Force. As far as I am concerned the Polish venture has been prepared by Mr. Braynelaw. Evidently Corring was doing something off his own bat, and I'm really puzzled what to do with you. But I'll try to find out from the Air Ministry. I dare say you can make yourself useful as an interpreter. We shall want interpreters.'

If it had been possible for it to do so, my heart would have sunk lower still. But during Group Captain Milder's account it had already reached that stratum in which there is nothing but self-pity and gloom. Had I been trained by the crack operational bomber squadron, gone through Intelligence, Ops., air-gunnery, and many other departments of the R.A.F. merely in order to act as an interpreter, I pondered to myself. My original invitation to join the service certainly spoke of something quite different.

'The first Poles are to arrive in a few days' time', the C.O. continued, unaware of the murky avenues through which my mind was wandering, 'several hundreds of them. Meanwhile we have to make the station ready for them. I expect in a day or two we shall know more about how to make use of you.' With these words he dismissed me.

II

The handful of officers present at Sleethole consisted exclusively of men with administrative jobs, most of them elderly or, at any rate, elderly-looking. Since the Polish Government had not yet signed the agreement with our Government, and the Treasury raised the usual objections in regard to the entire venture, the 'Polish show', as it was called by everyone at Sleethole, was for the time being unofficial and entirely in the nature of an improvisation. Since it would take considerable time before the Poles—half of whom were to be trained in France and half in this country—had gained the requisite knowledge of British methods and British aircraft, for many a day to come there would be no flying at Sleethole.

During the first day I was unable to discover a single redeeming feature about my new station. The C.O. alone seemed a good sort but I wondered whether he was a big enough man to make a real success of what was possibly the most difficult organizing task which the R.A.F. had yet had. The station was one of the oldest in the service, but for the moment it was more or less empty, the barracks and roads were silent, the hangars shut. I had come to regard aeroplanes as companions and was longing for the sight and sound of them. An aerodrome without planes was like a concert hall without an orchestra, like an orchestra without instruments. There was something funereal about the flat and inhospitable country exposed to the four winds, about the rows and rows of ugly barrack huts, about the old-fashioned hangars with their rusting doors and roofs, about the silent desolation of the entire place. I felt as though I were no longer in England where never a patch of the country seems to be without its redeeming feature and where even amid squalor you are liable to find some sign of kindness. Sleethole might have belonged to some inhospitable, distant part of the Continent, foreign and forbidding. A kingdom for the spirit of Manhill, for the life of Bentley! While my heart sank more and more, my mind tried to comfort me with the thought that it was only right that

after having enjoyed all that was best in the R.A.F., I should behold the reverse side of the picture as well. Sleethole would certainly be a test case for my devotion to the service and to the cause for which I had deliberately given up a particularly happy private life.

Only six officers were present at dinner. The beef was tough, the vegetables uneatable, and the pudding looked so unappetizing that I preferred to stick to cheese. Since the large windows of the anteroom had no black-out curtains, no lights could be switched on. The atmosphere within the black vastness of the cold anteroom, more like a gigantic barn than a place designed for human company, became unbearable.

After ten minutes in the dark anteroom, where practically the only sign of life was the gulping of beer, I put on my greatcoat and fled into the open. The camp stretching below the mess was swallowed up in an impenetrable blackness, but there were a few stars above. The clouds in the sky were as restless as an evil conscience in a sleepless bed. And yet this was the same sky that arched itself over Manhill, with its hangars and aeroplanes and its company of eager youth. For a long while I walked gingerly down the hill on which the mess was situated, and then past dark huts. Not even a sentry was to be seen with whom I might have started a chat.

After half an hour's aimless wandering I saw a chink of light escaping from one of the huts, and heard the sounds of a wireless. I stopped to listen to the music. Strings were playing the slow movement of Debussy's unearthly Quartet in G Minor. I stood spellbound and couldn't tear myself away even after the last sound had died into silence. And then a new tune emerged from the blackness: a contralto voice accompanied by a violin and a piano, was singing a song, I believe by Fauré. It ended with the words, 'beauté et bienveillance'. In the desolation of the wind-swept camp the words had a beauty that was almost cruel; at the same time they sounded as unreal and incongruous as if they had been breathed forth from a different planet. Through the vacant drabness of the night I walked back to the mess.

III

Though it was still cold, the weather improved on the second day and was clear and dry. The sun gave a certain grace to scenery that otherwise possessed neither grace nor virtue. Trucks with equipment moved slowly up the road. Inside the mess workmen were shifting furniture, measuring windows, and raising clouds of dust. There was no work for me, and after breakfast I went for a walk. I reported to the C.O. but was told by his clerk that he had nothing to say to me. He promised to receive me for another interview before long. Presumably he was trying to discover to what extent he was tied by the decision of the Air Ministry and how much or how little he need employ me without offending Corring. I did not blame him for trying to avoid me.

Even on the third day there was nothing for me to do. I kept waiting for my promised interview with the C.O. who, no doubt, considered that I was trespassing upon territory that he considered his very own. The situation suggested that whilst one department had selected him as commanding officer of the Polish show, another one had selected me for my job, without, however, informing the other department of their step. So Group Captain Milder found himself burdened with a collaborator whose very existence had never even entered into his schemes.

DIARY

Have just been rung up by the C.O.'s clerk to report at H.Q. at two-thirty. Am looking forward to the interview with some trepidation. With the traditional service predilection for avoiding responsibilities and waiting for events to take their own course, the C.O. may suggest some compromise that will prove unsatisfactory to both of us. Until the last three days my job with the Poles seemed to me so straightforward that I naturally never thought of it in any other terms than those of making myself proficient for it. It is three months since I was asked to accept it, and I believe that thanks to my recent training I am ready for it. The possibility of some sudden change is repugnant to me; yet at the same time I feel that I must accept unhesitatingly whatever comes my way. I have been spoilt by the companions, the surroundings and the work of the last two months, and must force myself to forget them. Yet I have made up my mind that if Group Captain Milder does not want me, I shall volunteer for active service, preferably as an air-gunner.

At first the C.O. seemed uneasy. He had been in touch with the Air Ministry and had been told that the Air Marshal 'very much wants Flying Officer R.L. to carry on his duties at this place'. The C.O. seemed to have accepted the inevitable with good grace but said that until the arrival of the Poles he could not map out my work for me and, anyhow, wasn't quite certain in what capacity to employ me. In reply I stated quite bluntly that the last thing I wanted was to upset his original plans and to be in his way. If he felt that the Polish show would be better served without me, I would apply for employment either in Intelligence with the R.A.F. in France or ask for permission to continue my brief training as an air-gunner. Group Captain Milder then begged me to wait, and when I saluted to take leave, he added, 'You will most probably have to act as liaison officer between myself and the Polish officers'.

IV

There was no work for me on the fourth day, but I had another talk with the C.O. Gradually he was beginning to realize that there were countless problems to tackle which formed no part of the duties of any of the other officers at the station and which I might possibly be able to help him to solve. At the end of our talk he asked me to visit the Polish Ambassador in London as soon as possible to discuss a variety of unofficial

and yet important questions connected with the forthcoming presence of the Poles at our station.

So the following morning I went to London where first I had a long interview with the Polish Ambassador whom I had known in pre-war days. One of our first tasks was to collect some private funds in case they were needed for the Poles, most of whom would probably arrive completely destitute. Somehow no-one seemed to have thought of this. On the previous day I had suggested to the C.O. that if we were to wait for official sanction for such a fund we might have to wait until the end of the war, and I promised to do my best to raise the necessary money privately. In London a friend immediately offered me a cheque for £50, and I invited myself to lunch with another friend to wheedle woollen comforts out of her for the Poles. She was the head of a large private organization which provided such goods for our own forces and at first wouldn't hear a word of dissipating either her energies or her supplies. But by the time we reached coffee several dozen woollen socks were produced and I was promised several more dozen pullovers and scarves. I also rang up a few other friends who promised to help. Then there was a number of questions concerning the more intellectual wellbeing of the Poles, books, lectures, musical instruments, and other matters that had not been thought of.

On my return from London I rang up the C.O. who asked me to report to him as soon as I had had my dinner. After I had finished he asked whether I would go through the MS. of the speech which he was to deliver to the Polish troops on their arrival. And would I look at the Polish translation and, if necessary, correct it? And could I draft for him the official letters of thanks which he would write to those who had given me money in London? And would I work out a scheme for popularizing a number of R.A.F. practices among the Poles?

At the end of our talk the C.O. announced that on the following morning I should be given my own office at H.Q. It was going to be only a temporary one, for he wanted me to have the room next to his, which for the time being was occupied by someone else. There seemed no longer any question as to whether I should remain or not.

I had hardly ever before worked in an office, and the occasion provided the inevitable thrill of novelty. I asked the corporal to get me a pen and some notepaper and within five minutes my table was covered with hundreds, literally hundreds, of sheets of crested notepaper, an array of pencils and pens, a copy of King's Regulations and the Manual of War. It all looked extremely businesslike and I enjoyed being good-naturedly accepted by the N.C.O.s of the Orderly Room, a far more influential body of men than their apparently humble status would suggest, as part of the general unorthodoxy of the Polish show. For an occasional inquiring glance or suppressed smile left me in no doubt that it was the unorthodoxy which aroused their interest and not any possible qualifications possessed by their new chief.

The excitement of flying, of guns and aeroplanes was over. But the new work might hold its own excitements. After all, the building up of a foreign air force on British soil was something quite new, and our show was not merely unorthodox; it was unique in British annals and might yet prove historic. I could not help wondering whether it would not possibly become an example for others to follow. . . .

V

The first Polish contingent was due to arrive. We were looking forward to the unusual experience but also dreading it. Would it work? was the question uppermost in everyone's mind. Would it be possible to merge British and Polish standards into a new composite one? Traditions, character, discipline, food, everything was different, and there seemed to be more scope for friction than one cared to think.

Two days before the arrival of the Poles at our station a cable announced their departure from Paris. Next morning another cable notified their departure from Cherbourg. Late in the evening a telephone call from one of our southern ports gave the news of their safe arrival in England. And, finally, on the following morning another call announced their departure from their port of landing. They were due at Sleethole at 2 p.m.

We were expecting them to arrive in a very poor condition, haggard and ill clothed. After weeks in insanitary camps in Rumania and Hungary, they had managed to get through to France where they had been herded together in camps only a little less repugnant, and, of course, during their retreat from Poland they had lost everything they possessed.

The authorities, fearful of the burning passions of unknown Continental manhood, had arranged for all the female personnel, W.A.A.F.s, charwomen, and wives in married quarters to be withdrawn from the station. The C.O.'s wife was the only exception.

Soon after 1 p.m. a telephone call from the guard-room announced that the buses conveying the Poles were passing through the entrance to the station. The C.O., the senior administrative officer, and I jumped into a car and drove down to the men's quarters at the bottom of the camp where in the big dining-hall the C.O. was to make his speech of welcome.

When we arrived at our destination, the Poles—a hundred of them—were just alighting from the bus. They looked neither haggard nor poorly dressed, and most of them were carrying new suitcases. 'Far smarter luggage than I've ever possessed,' the C.O. remarked.

By two o'clock everyone was assembled in the dining-hall. All British personnel not otherwise on duty had to be present. Most of them had come straight from their work—in their working clothes. Though the occasion was a solemn one, there was no spit and polish about it. Our P.T. instructor in the front rank was still wearing his gym shoes and a sports

singlet under his tunic. Another British airman was holding in his hand the wet signboard on which he had just been painting a Polish caption of whose meaning he was presumably quite ignorant. He held his *chef-d'œuvre* rather proudly as though it were a banner. The words upon it were, 'Urynał dla żołnierzy' (Men's Lavatory).

The C.O. read out his speech with that quiet simplicity that is so much more impressive than any deliberate oratory. The R.A.F. officer of Polish origin who had prepared the translation read the Polish text sentence by sentence and rather theatrically. Squadron Leader K., the senior Polish officer, replied in Polish in a brief speech delivered with modesty and soldierly straightforwardness. It was translated by one of the junior Polish officers, the only one among them who knew English. He had obviously learned the translation by heart and up to the last sentence he went through the speech without faltering. But just before reaching the end he got stuck. He tried hard to remember the last sentence, but for about fifteen seconds we all waited in vain. Finally, the poor man did the only sensible thing: he stammered, 'I'm sorry', pulled out a slip of paper from his pocket, and read out the obstreperous sentence.

When this ceremony was over we drove back hurriedly to the mess where the C.O. was to receive the officers alone. 'I hope they won't want to kiss me as they do in Poland,' he said half jokingly and half in fear. He had spent a few weeks in Poland in an official capacity and had had opportunity to observe some of the Polish customs.

While we were waiting at the entrance to the mess, I suddenly remembered the traditional Polish custom of receiving an honoured guest with bread and salt. After a frantic rush through kitchen and larder, I procured a tray on which a fresh loaf of bread and a dish with salt were placed. The tray was then put on a table by the entrance.

'What do I do with it?' the C.O. asked me, glancing uneasily at the tray. 'Do I make another speech, does the Pole return the things to me, or what?'

'I think you might say, sir, "In accordance with the ancient custom of your country I greet you with bread and salt".'

The C.O.'s simple and essentially British nature was averse to all forms of playacting, and he evidently dreaded the function. But he was devoted to the cause that had been entrusted to him and was determined to make a success of it, and if the job required it, would even parade with bread and salt in front of his own officers.

The Polish officers, in fur coats, leather jackets, mackintoshes, or short shooting coats, were coming up the hill towards the mess. Every one of them seemed conscious of the moment's significance. Though they had proved themselves in battle, they had been driven out of their homes by Germany's overwhelming might, and now they were the very first batch of warriors to begin on British soil a renewed struggle. Were they not the first heralds of Polonia Restituta? With the Poles' inherent sense of history and their keen awareness of everything concerning the indepen-

dence of their land, they seemed to radiate a sense of their national past, present, and future.

Once again they were led by Squadron Leader K., a slim dark-eyed man, whose straight soldierly carriage made him look taller than he really was, and upon whose pale and tense face the experiences of the terrible last few months had brought premature lines. A few yards before reaching the mess the Polish group stopped. This was the moment for Group Captain Milder to advance and present Squadron Leader K. with the bread and salt. He delivered his few words and I translated them.

The Poles had obviously not been prepared for this welcome. In the eyes of each of them there were tears. Squadron Leader K. took the tray from the C.O.'s hands, but it was some time before he had collected himself sufficiently to make his reply. 'We are too deeply moved, my colonel,' he said, 'to express to you what we feel at this unexpected reception. But I wish to thank you in the name of us all from the bottom of my heart.'

Later in the day the doctor asked me to assist him in sick quarters. The Polish airmen meanwhile had had their baths and their meal and were assembling for medical examination. I quickly prepared for the M.O. a few essential Polish words and phrases that would enable him to address our guests without my assistance—'rozebrać sie' (undress), 'wstać' (get up), 'pokazać zęby' (show your teeth), 'poczekać' (wait)—and by the time the twentieth patient had passed through his hands, he indulged in his newly acquired linguistic prowess without the slightest sign of self-consciousness.

In spite of their recent conditions of living, these men exhibited a surprisingly fine physique, and the M.O. could not get over the high standard of their hearts and lungs. 'Far better than any of our own men', he continued to repeat whenever I drifted into his room.

Practically all the Poles wore round their necks little chains with crosses or medallions of the Madonna. They were slightly bewildered by the new country, of which they had a far vaguer notion than of any other country in Europe, even of the U.S.A. about which the many Polish *émigrés* in America and the films had given them a certain amount of information, but they were completely at ease and delighted to be out of France and in our midst.

By nightfall it became evident that our own airmen were hugely enjoying the experience of meeting the Poles, whose courteous manners succeeded in breaking down British reserve. When at 8 p.m. I walked across the camp towards the C.O.'s house, I stopped repeatedly to listen to the boisterous laughter in the huts and the queer conversations in progress. '*Monsieur, air force de carrière?*' 'Carrier? Oh, you mean career! No, *non*, called up since the war.' 'War, war? *Co to jest*' (what is) 'war?' 'War, fighting Hitler, *guerre.*' '*Ah, guerre! Monsieur en guerre, combat Allemands?*' 'No, not combat Allemand, called up for *guerre.*' 'Called up? *Co to jest* called up, *qu'est-ce-que c'est* called up, *monsieur?*' 'Called

up, not volunteer.' '*Ah, ah, monsieur, non volontaire, ah, guerre-soldat, guerre-soldat?*' '*Oui, oui, guerre-soldat*', came the Englishman's final answer with a sigh of relief and after he had dug out every bit of French that had lain buried in his memory.

The C.O. had impressed upon our men that he expected them to treat the Poles as our guests, friends, and allies, and to make them feel thoroughly at home. They responded magnificently and in a spirit that came as a surprise to everyone, and probably most to themselves. Within a few short hours they seemed to have overcome their natural suspicion of foreigners, and the helpfulness and kindness usually ingrained in the average Briton's soul came into full play. Once again, I felt proud to belong to the R.A.F. I should have felt prouder still had our officers followed the example of the troops.

No-one reflected the occasion in a more shining light than Group Captain Milder. He had asked me to dine with him and his wife at their home, not far from the officers' mess. When I entered their drawing-room I could see at once how elated and happy he felt. He was full of enthusiasm for the general bearing and the response of our visitors, and more determined than ever to make of the Polish venture a real success. I was surprised, however, to find that my own enthusiasm was directed not so much towards that venture as towards the man who in some indefinable way had come to symbolize for me the Polish cause. It was as if my own feelings of the moment groped for something more tangible than a national cause, and the C.O. provided the focal point for them. My one ambition became to be of real service to him, and for the first time in many years I experienced the stimulating sensation of wishing nothing so much as to prove a real help to another.

VI

Next morning I got up before six, had breakfast at seven, and worked incessantly throughout the day. Soon after nine the Polish officers came into my room at H.Q. to make an official call. From then onwards they bombarded me with questions. From eleven till one, I walked with the C.O. and Squadron Leader K. all over the station, and watched the Poles at their meal, receiving their equipment, continuing their medical examination. For the moment my chief official function was to act as liaison between the C.O. and the Polish officers.

The C.O. had asked me to treat all the newcomers, officers and men, to their first lecture on British soil and to talk to them about certain British ways, methods, and habits. So in the afternoon we assembled in the station theatre, and after an hour's talk I invited questions. The problems that seemed to preoccupy the audience most were those of saluting, behaviour in the mess, relations between officers and men, and formalities in general. There were two questions to which I was unable to give an immediate reply, and presumably even King's Regulations could not have

provided an answer to them. One officer got up to ask whether he might use scent, and a soldier whether the wearing of jewellery was permitted.

Though by nature impatient, the Poles had had plenty of opportunity to learn the virtue of patience. The weeks spent idly in Balkan camps and the months of unfulfilled promises and procrastination in France, must have taught them to accept their fate philosophically. But there was no mistaking their burning impatience to have done with their training at Sleethole as quickly as possible so as to return to France to fight the Hun. Despite their demoralizing experiences of the last few months—defeat, emigration, inactivity, lack of discipline, life in sordid camps—their spirits seemed high. This may possibly have been due to their delight at forming once again part of regular military life. At last their lives had regained meaning. No longer were they emigrants and outcasts but allies and equals.

VII

On Sunday a Polish priest was sent from London to celebrate the first Mass for our guests. Squadron Leader K., the senior Polish officer, and myself representing the C.O., led the church parade. The church building, of corrugated iron, ugly and cold, belonged to the Church of England, but was lent for the occasion to the Polish padre who with a few appropriate touches had made it look less alien to his congregation, most of whom had never been inside any other than a Roman Catholic church. One of the Polish officers, in grey flannels and a tweed coat, acted as vergier. The Union Jack and the R.A.F. flag surmounted the altar which was flanked by the plaster casts of two anaemic-looking angels. The deep purple of the priest's vestments clashed uncompromisingly with the cotton hangings of a virulent blue that formed the permanent adornment round the altar.

The hymns were sung by voices that in some cases were of a depth and beauty that we associate with Russian voices only. While English choirs so often have what might be described as baritone colouring, in Slav choirs the tenors have the high-pitched ring of real tenors and the bass has the full profundity of a bass and is intensely masculine and sombre. Though I was little impressed by the padre, who was kindly and sincere, but rattled off his prayers at what must have been record speed, it was impossible not to be moved by the singing with its deliberation and austerity. This first service in the hour of their national rededication must have been pregnant for the singers with poignant associations. No-one but themselves could possibly perceive the full sense of loss, pathos, and hope that rose with their hymns. When the moment for silent prayer came and, finally, for the raising of the holy sacrament, the congregation appeared to have grown so deeply conscious of its personal and national sorrow that its pain seemed to fill the church from end to end. That atmosphere of sorrow would have been manifest even without such tan-

gible signs as the tears that fell from Squadron Leader K.'s eyes or the stifled sobs throughout the church. The service ended with the singing of the more austere of Poland's two national anthems, 'Boże coś Polske' (God that hast Poland). When the service was over the padre walked slowly away from the altar carrying in his hands the holy sacrament. In the general silence you could hear the beat of your pulse.

Outside a brilliant sun greeted us. In the misty blue and friendly gold of an English winter morning the fate of a martyred nation, so movingly brought to one's consciousness during the last half-hour, began to lose its tragic colours. The reality of Britain's less painful present and of the kindlier rhythm of British life asserted itself once again.

VIII

There is always something intensely interesting in the contrast of national psychologies. I never ceased to be fascinated by the difference between the Poles' manner of expressing themselves, and that of their British colleagues. When the Poles spoke, not only were their faces expressive but equally their arms, hands, and bodies. Their talk was nervous, even restless and intense. Since talking was for them almost synonymous with action, it was more entertaining to observe their conversation than that of our own troops. They seemed to reveal their feelings not only in speech but in every movement. In consequence, there was little of the unknown, of that mystery about them that usually enveloped their British fellows; and in the end you came to the conclusion that these latter, though superficially less entertaining to watch and endowed with a possibly less attractive manner, were really the more interesting of the two.

DIARY

It seems that in the Polish Air Force, higher ranks used to be distributed more freely than in the R.A.F. Since a complete co-ordination with British standards and methods was considered desirable from the very beginning, the Poles had very wisely accepted the provisional stipulation of the Anglo-Polish agreement that at first they should content themselves with R.A.F. ranks at least one lower than they had held at home. It causes therefore a jarring note when some of them already insist on being given their original Polish ranks. I foresee serious difficulties arising out of this question.

IX

On Monday, on the C.O.'s instructions I had to give the Poles a second lecture, this time on the ways and methods of our bomber organization. Once again both officers and men assembled in the theatre, a large corrugated-iron structure with a correspondingly big stage, the only redeeming though somewhat incongruous-looking feature being a snow-white piano that must have been left there by mistake. Since regular instructions

hadn't begun yet, the Poles were anxious to pick up any sort of information, and thus did not seem to mind the lecture lasting over seventy minutes. The ceaseless flow of questions that followed showed how keen they were. Once again, many more questions came from the men than from the officers. It may be that these latter felt tongue-tied in front of their men.

The C.O. had asked me to call on him after dinner. After a few preliminary remarks he went to his writing-table, unlocked a secret drawer, and removed from it a file marked 'Secret'. The file contained documents concerning the relevant negotiations between the Polish and British Governments. He asked me to take them with me, read them—keeping them under lock and key during the night—and tell him next morning what I considered Sleethole's, which really meant his own, reactions to the theoretical plans contained in the document should be.

On several previous occasions the C.O. had given me proofs of his confidence and each time I felt touched by them. His trust deepened my devotion to him and my determination to do all I could to help him in our venture.

X

DIARY

Received this morning a letter from a stranger who, having heard that I've joined the R.A.F., felt moved to express some well-meant but exaggerated sentiments. However foolish the letter may be, it has induced me to do some heart-searching. Though personally I have never been guilty of regarding every man in uniform as something of a hero, I have noticed that such an attitude is by no means rare among civilians and, strange to say, even among some of my colleagues whose object of such hero-worship is . . . themselves. Early in a war it is probably inevitable that to the civilian, ignorant of the ways in the services, the very fact of someone joining up voluntarily evokes a vague notion of heroism or, at any rate, bravery. Yet, while many join the services for idealistic reasons, the fact remains that many join for other reasons and, moreover, discover that they are now having a far 'better time' than the civilians.

To begin with, we who participate in the execution of the war are thus the actors in the only play on the national stage that matters. Though individually we have no notion of the conduct or the progress of the war, we are gaining at least an inside knowledge of some particular aspect of it. The very fact of our wearing a uniform gives us a great psychological advantage over the civilian. However little we may really be entitled to that advantage it is nevertheless a source of enjoyment to most of us. If there is any heroism at this stage of the war, it is confined to two classes: those who do the actual fighting, mainly in the Navy and the R.A.F.; and those who sit at home, waiting for news from their loved ones, apparently idle, their former interests and often even occupations gone, and a feeling of uncertainty, solitude, and superfluity undermining the very justification for lives which they yet have to carry on. So far it is we in uniform who are the

'profiteers' of this war and who cull the occasional thrills that this strangely unreal war holds in store for a small minority.

It is we in uniform, and we alone, who have shaken off most of our ordinary responsibilities, placing them on the shoulders of the state, the Air Ministry, or Admiralty, the commanding officer, the adjutant, the mess steward, the orderly room, our batman. Even if some of us perform deeds of heroism, how much easier is it to be heroic under conditions of actual warfare than amid peace-time drudgery! No, without any exaggerated modesty, we can lay no claim to anyone's admiration, not even that of kindly strangers who write to us in pathetic ignorance of the true situation.

XI

On moving to my permanent room at H.Q. situated next to the C.O.'s I discovered that all my bells were out of order, so I asked the corporal to arrange for the necessary repairs. A few hours later I was summoned by Snithers, the little fat officer who had given me such an alarming welcome on my arrival at Sleethole. In front of several airmen, who happened to be present in his room, he made a veritable scene. What b—— right did I have to give orders to anyone at H.Q.; he would teach ruddy amateurs like myself to behave themselves! I felt completely defenceless and didn't utter a word. My involuntarily apologetic attitude naturally inflamed his zest to show off and he set out to call me names, and finished with a theatrical shout, 'When I give orders you've got to obey'.

In his civilian days Snithers was said to have been among other things the manager of a night club and to have been 'rolling in money'. What had made him join the R.A.F. was beyond me. With his reddish hair, stiff with brillantine and plastered back like a glossy skull cap, with bloodshot, restless eyes, sallow complexion and a sepia-coloured birthmark on one of his cheeks, he suggested to me a being who, while trying to escape from some hidden devil—an organic complaint or some other trouble?—moved through life as if he were a character in a play. This impression was heightened by a flamboyant exhibitionism which made me suspect that at some period in his career he might actually have been on the stage.

Apparently my crime called for further retribution, for later in the day the C.O. sent for me. In his considerate and friendly way he told me that Snithers had reported my misdeed to him, and the C.O. advised me in future to avoid treading on the corns of those whose 'minds are solidified in departmental routine or in exalted opinions of their own importance', as he put it. Having never before worked in a Government department, I foresaw that my popularity with the knights of the red tape would deteriorate rapidly.

XII

A week after the first, the second Polish consignment reached Sleethole, another hundred officers and men. With them arrived Colonel Sok, their future commanding officer, an extremely courteous gentleman. I was very sorry that the efficient Squadron Leader K., hitherto the senior Polish officer, had had to make way for Colonel Sok. We got on well together and he knew how to maintain the discipline of both his officers and men.

Once the arrival of Polish consignments had become a regular feature, we dispensed with all speech-making; but the C.O. asked me to select two of the newly arrived officers and to bring them to his house for drinks together with Colonel Sok. When we were leaving after seven, the C.O. took me aside and said, 'I want to visit the men's quarters after dinner. Would you care to come with me?' I always felt gratified when the C.O. asked me to do something for him. So I hurried back to the mess for dinner and called on him again at eight.

We first visited the hospital where four British doctors were working like slaves. In a single evening to go through the medical examination of some eighty men whose language you don't know is no mean achievement. But most of the new R.A.F. officers who had arrived within the last few days were as yet unaffected by the peculiar atmosphere of Sleethole, and were inspired by a keenness that made light of all difficulties.

Will this keenness last, once the glamour of novelty has worn off and Sleethole's spirit has taken hold of the new arrivals? I repeatedly asked myself. Will not the Poles then cease to be 'our unfortunate and heroic allies', deserving of sympathy and admiration, and merely be regarded as troublesome foreigners with unfamiliar standards of conduct? I knew the national idiosyncrasies of both nations too well and was too conscious of Sleethole's deplorable influence to fool myself into thinking that the honeymoon spirit would last for ever. In fact, I couldn't help detecting here and there the first signs of friction, but, for the time being, preferred to shut my eyes and to tell myself that I was merely imagining things.

From the sick quarters we went into the dining-room where the Polish soldiers were arriving in small groups for their evening meal. I would gladly have exchanged the leathery beef, watery potatoes, and dirty-looking puddings of our own mess for their sizzling sausages, eggs, kippers, and fried potatoes. At least they knew what they were eating, whereas with us it was usually a matter of conjecture. Whatever the qualifications of our chef may have been, he certainly knew how to transform good meat, excellent vegetables, or any other impeccable produce into unrecognizable messes.

The cheerfulness, goodwill, and the cracking of jokes (in pidgin Anglo-Polish-French) which animated sick quarters and dining-room, filled even the equipment section in which the R.A.F. personnel had been working without a break since noon, fortifying themselves with innumerable cups of strong tea and with their unquenchable sense of humour.

After a visit to the sleeping quarters, we stopped at the hut in which the Poles were handing over their civilian belongings. The floor was littered with bags and suitcases and a thousand mementoes of the recent civilian interlude in the life of the Polish Air Force. There were garish Rumanian ties and cheap French pullovers in vivid patterns and French novels with suggestive title-pages and Hungarian knick-knacks, all exhibited for a last time before disappearing into the oblivion of our station stores. The C.O. was most anxious that the Poles should realize fully that their belongings were not taken away from them but were merely being stored for their future use. Most popular with our guests seemed to be bottles containing some kind of fragrant contents. Every suitcase or parcel revealed at least one such bottle. The R.A.F. sergeant in charge of the proceedings caught my eye, and coming up to us said, 'I've never seen so many bottles of scent and eau de Cologne in all my life, sir. You'd think this luggage belonged to travelling chorus girls.' Even the C.O. looked as though he were going to laugh, but he restrained himself, saying instead, 'But I can assure you, sergeant, they don't fight like chorus girls, and our own men can learn a lot from them.'

XIII

DIARY

At noon a Battle landed at our aerodrome—the first aeroplane since I've been here, and the two members of the crew came to lunch. I chose my seat next to them and in the course of conversation the subject of a recent large-scale raid over the North Sea cropped up. Who did it? I asked.

'The Wellington boys.'

'Where from?'

'Chiefly Manhill.'

'Were many planes lost?'

'Six.'

For the first time since September the war suddenly hit me with its full reality. For a while I didn't dare to ask the one question that clamoured to be asked. Even during my happiest days in Suffolk I had never realized how painfully dear Manhill had become to me. It seemed as though never before had I loved more intensely though so impersonally. Eventually I asked whether they knew the names of any of those who had been lost.

'Did you know a couple who were known as the Heavenly Twins, Linnes and McRury?'

I nodded.

'They were badly shot up and wounded but managed to bring their machine back to Manhill. But they couldn't make the landing and were burned to death when they crashed.'

Good God, I have never hated the Hun so much.

XIV

For all the C.O.'s kindness to me it appeared that the final legalization of my status depended upon the verdict of Mr. Jonathan Braynelaw who one day was to pay Sleethole a visit. The C.O. must have given much thought to the subject of my position, for on the fateful day he called me into his room and for the first time explained the situation fully to me. It appeared that it was Mr. Braynelaw, one of the least-known but most astute men in the inner councils of our air warfare, who was the true *spiritus rector* of the Polish show. The C.O. spoke of him as one of the great powers behind the throne: all the important details related to Sleethole depended ultimately upon his verdict, and among these the C.O. apparently regarded that of official liaison. It would rest with Mr. Braynelaw whether I should continue in my position or not. The guest was coming from London to lunch with the C.O.

Immediately after my talk with the latter I walked up to the mess for lunch. As soon as I arrived there I was told that he had been 'phoning for me, asking me to go straight away to his house to join him and Mr. Braynelaw for lunch. I assumed that the guest from London could not give his final verdict without having first inspected the victim.

Mr. Braynelaw, in immaculate civilian clothes, was a big man, radiating both intellectual and physical power. If it hadn't been for the frequent twinkle in his lively eye, the impression of mental alertness and superiority that he exhaled might easily have been intimidating. It was both impressive and amusing to listen when, while referring to some minor detail of our work and masticating a piece of chicken, he casually asked Group Captain Milder, 'How much do you need for this? Five hundred pounds, a thousand? All right, you shall have it.' And then again, 'A staff car for the Polish C.O.? Of course, he must have one, poor man. I can get staff cars three for twopence.' And later still turning to his assistant, 'Remind me to tell the Secretary of State to send a Christmas card to the Polish C.O.', and again, 'For the hoisting of the Polish ensign, we'll send along the S. of S. Or would you rather have someone else?' There was no mistaking Mr. Braynelaw's power. Yet whatever he said, he seemed to be poking fun at himself and to be enjoying both his power and the jokes he made at his own expense. The only time the ironic twinkle in his eye gave place to an almost elegiac expression was when he referred to the Polish venture as such. He obviously regarded it as his pet hobby. 'This is the only truly romantic thing in the whole of the present war so far', he remarked during coffee after lunch, and there was conviction in his words. I was more impressed by him than I had been by anyone for some time.

I took leave as soon as lunch was over, and the C.O. and his guest had a *tête-à-tête* lasting a couple of hours. Soon after Mr. Braynelaw's departure the C.O. called me into his room at H.Q. 'In the first place about

yourself,' he began. 'Mr. Braynelaw says he leaves it entirely to me what to do with you. I don't know whether this pleases you or not.' There was nothing for me to say, and after a moment the C.O. continued. 'To begin with, of course, we must get another ring on your sleeve, and after a time we shall have to push you up yet another step. You can't go on being Chief Liaison Officer and my Personal Assistant and yet junior to most of the Polish officers who I want to regard you as my representative.'

I thanked him. Yet at the same time I felt sorry that he should have formulated Mr. Braynelaw's apparent decision in terms of promotion. Quite frankly, questions of rank and promotion not only embarrassed but even frightened me. But I took it to be the established way in which our betters in the service expressed their appreciation. Anyhow, the only thing that mattered was that at last my position was established and that there should be no room for any ambiguity in the relationship between the C.O. and myself.

XV

DIARY

What at first I had hoped were merely the outcroppings of my own supercritical imagination seemed to be based on facts. Some of the Polish officers are already growing discontented. They seem to have got it into their heads that a rapidly expanding and badly understaffed Air Force, engaged in actual warfare, can produce overnight all the requisite instructors, equipment, and other necessities for foreign newcomers. They do not know, of course, that barely a fortnight ago there was no proper organization at this place, no staff, no furniture, no equipment, and that practically everything had to be conjured up virtually from nowhere. They do not appear to realize that to provide a large new training centre for pilots and instrument makers, equipment officers and navigators, riggers and air-gunners, armourers and administrative personnel, in fact for an entire Air Force, and under conditions for which there is no precedent, is a task which even in peace-time would have taken months if not years. They do not know that purely British training centres throughout the country are suffering from a painful dearth of instructors, equipment, and almost everything required.

For a week or so all contact between the C.O. and Colonel Sok was through the Liaison Officer, and, except for informal chats, the two never had dealings with one another except through me. This roundabout method which would be absurd between people who in more senses than one speak the same language, had numerous advantages. The linguistic reason for it was self-evident, but the psychological aspects were even more important. To begin with, by right accent and intonation I could tone down some of the irritation and impatience with which messages intended for the C.O. were often framed in Polish H.Q. Thanks to this method I could save him unnecessary worry and keep him above the

petty controversies which were rooted not so much in facts as in national idiosyncrasies, and which were inevitable in a venture so full of psychological dynamite as ours.

About a week after Colonel Sok's arrival the C.O. asked me to announce at Polish H.Q. that he would be calling officially on the Colonel. I accompanied him on this visit, during which there were no clashes, but when Colonel Sok remarked that 'Polish airmen could not possibly be expected to be employed as batmen, even to their own officers', and that the R.A.F. would have to meet the rapidly growing demands for batmen for Polish officers, the C.O. could not help interrupting him with the remark, 'So you consider that it wouldn't be beneath the dignity of British airmen to act as batmen to Polish officers?' But he said it so courteously that I wondered whether the Colonel fully realized the implication of the remark.

XVI

Whereas most people in the R.A.F. had their clearly defined jobs, a pilot doing this, an armourer that, an establishment officer something else, there seemed to be no limits, either of kind or time, to the functions of a liaison officer. My work usually began at eight even while I was having breakfast, and did not end until I went to bed. Whenever after dinner in the anteroom I tried to do some reading, every few moments one or other of the Poles would approach me asking about the time-table for next day's occupations, or whether I was going to give another lecture, or if Polish working parties were to be issued with overalls, or did one close a letter in English with the words, 'With deep respect and estimation'? Do you write to an unmarried lady as 'Respected Missis' or 'Miss'? Do you address a letter to Group Captain Milder, 'Mr. Group Captain' or 'Esquire Group Captain' and do you begin with the words, 'Sir Group Captain' or 'My Commander'? After a few hours of such stylistic frolics I usually tried to retire into a dark corner in the billiard room to jot down a few notes for my diary.

XVII

It took some time before regular instructions for our guests could be carried out, and at first there was little for the officers to do, so the C.O. asked me if I could find the time to squeeze in some English lessons. Thus for the first few weeks I had to give the Polish officers daily lessons in English.

One day during the lesson we dealt with food, and, as usual, I did my best to secure the active collaboration of my pupils, making as many as possible reply to questions. They were extraordinarily keen and gifted and took endless trouble to master the illogical intricacies of the new language. So as usual, they vied with one another in providing the answers to such

heart-searching problems as, 'What do you eat in Poland for breakfast?' 'What do you drink with your coffee?' 'Do you prefer sausage to ham?'

Next day after lunch Colonel Sok came up to me and the ceremonious manner of his approach and the brick-coloured patches on his forehead, instantly made me suspect that something sinister was brewing. 'I have to approach you to speak to you in a matter of elevated seriousness and delicateness', were his first words, spoken not in his usual Polish, but in the somewhat baroque English which had been his great pride when he first arrived, and which he was perfecting rapidly. He had evidently prepared his little say with great care and memorized it. 'I am addressing you in my own name and in the name of my officers', with the accent on the 'my'. 'In the course of your English instructions yesterday—and I must assure you that till yesterday all my officers have been most warmly appreciative of your instructions and of your solicitude for them—you have expressed certain views which were exorbitantly offensive to our national honour.'

Good heavens, I thought, my mind racing through all the items from sausage to spaghetti and rice pudding, what could I possibly have said that might affect a people's national honour? I failed to detect anything in my modest educational endeavours that might conceivably be construed into bringing about a deterioration in the relations of traditional friendship between His Majesty's Government and the Government of the Polish Republic. 'I am sorry, sir, if I have done so,' I said, 'but quite honestly I haven't the slightest idea what you are referring to.'

Colonel Sok merely emphasized his attitude of stiff ceremonial and the red patches on his forehead became even redder. 'Yesterday during your instruction you asked one of my officers', with the accent on the 'my', "'Do you like cheese?'" Did you not?'

'Indeed I did, but was there anything wrong about my question?'

The patches grew redder still. 'You may remember that when the first of *my* officers landed on English territory, some most untactful observations have been pronounced about their appetite for cheese. In view of this absolute fact, I and my officers', with the accent on the 'I', 'consider that your question came from voluntary premeditation and, in consequence, was most gravely injurious to our national dignity.' And then reverting to Polish as though he had reached the end of his prepared piece, he continued, 'I agree that Polish and English standards of living are different and that we are a poor nation. This, however, should not be a justification for insinuations which are, to say the least, out of place. I must ask you to prepare your lessons in future with greater care or I shall find myself obliged to approach Group Captain Milder.'

I could hardly believe my ears or eyes. But there he was, Colonel Sok, as large as life, mastering only with effort the uprush of national indignation, the intensity of which undoubtedly made him regard himself as one of his country's national defenders, nay, martyrs. Since I am deficient in the gift of quick repartee and there was nothing I could think of, I

merely muttered, 'Thank you, sir', and left him standing, the red patches on his forehead aflame.

What Colonel Sok had said about the consumption of cheese by some of 'his' officers was perfectly true. When the first Polish consignment arrived, we were amused to notice that fifteen of their officers disposed of twelve pounds of cheese during lunch and dinner. They probably felt as little stimulated by the unsavoury cooking in our mess as I did, and very wisely discovered that cheese was the only food on the table that the chef had had no opportunity of murdering. Anyhow, whatever their reasons, for a day or two their cheese offensive had become the good-natured quip among the British members of the mess. Somehow this must have reached their ears. And because like everyone else in the British camp, I had completely forgotten the incident, I was not deterred by any warning voice when I included cheese in the list of articles of which the 'instruction' was composed.

In the evening to cheer the C.O. up after a particularly heavy day, I told him of the incident. For his amusement I tried to copy Colonel Sok's pompous attitude and speech. To my surprise the C.O. did not respond in the anticipated way, but on the contrary got very angry. He wanted instantly to call on the Colonel to tell him that harmonious collaboration between the two H.Q.s would become extremely difficult if every word on the part of the British officers was suspected or misconstrued, or if we were no longer allowed to indulge in good-natured jokes. It was not possible to weigh every word, and the R.A.F. did not consist of maiden ladies whose sensitive nerves have to be considered at every point. I begged the C.O. to do nothing: our guests obviously still suffered from the legitimate refugee complex, but in time would no doubt develop a stronger sense of humour. Anyhow it did not seem likely that many of them shared Colonel Sok's views. In the end the C.O. began to see the funny side of the matter and agreed not to call on the Colonel. He ended by saying, 'At any rate, I hope you'll write this incident down in your diary, and if one day you should be writing a record of our show, I hope the cheese incident will illustrate some of the difficulties we've to put up with in trying to organize a foreign air force.'

XVIII

As if intent to express the less austere spirit of approaching Christmas, Sleethole provided me for a second day in succession with light relief. For on the day following Colonel Sok's *démarche*, Snithers burst into my room at H.Q. 'I say, old boy,' he crowed, 'why don't you ever call on me to get some extra petrol coupons? Don't you know that you're entitled to coupons up to 300 miles per month? And if you want more, well, what's Snithy for if not to shut one eye! *You* make the request, *we* deliver the goods.'

I couldn't believe my ears. But before I had time to collect myself, he

continued, 'By the way, old boy, I hear that in civvy street you've done some scribbling. I myself have been in that racket—nothing very much, you know, gossip columns and rot like that, but's easy money, packets of it, packets, I can assure you. Come and dine with us one night. The little wife's dying to meet you. So long, baby, and don't forget the coupons.'

There certainly were more things in heaven and earth . . . and one of them was 'Snithy'. Evidently the C.O. had spoken to him. Or it may have been the adjutant who, as I suspected, was anything but enamoured of Snithers. But I had never had much confidence in violent changes of weather. The magic wouldn't work for long, for no leopard has ever been known to change its spots.

XIX

For several days before Christmas we had been discussing arrangements for the festive days. The C.O. was determined that the Poles should have a Polish Christmas with Polish food. The chief difficulty was to provide the great quantity of poppy seeds indispensable for the traditional Polish Christmas sweet, 'Kluski z makiem', a sort of noodles cooked in milk and flavoured with a generous admixture of sugar ground with poppy seeds. But finally we succeeded in securing from London fifteen pounds of the precious seeds and the prospects for Christmas Eve looked bright. For in Poland the climax of Christmas is not the 25th, but the supper on Christmas Eve.

My own ambition had been to secure for every man at the station at least two presents, and I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. From personal friends and one or two organizations I obtained several hundred woollen comforts, a few thousand cigarettes, five hundred bars of chocolate, and an enormous case full of games and books. Though the gifts were meant in the first place for the Polish personnel, I was left complete freedom to dispose of them as I liked, and with the C.O.'s approval, decided that not only the Poles but each of our own men—there were several hundred of them at Sleethole—should receive a similar present. Thus for the last three days before Christmas the C.O.'s ever helpful wife had been tying up hundreds of parcels, each one consisting of a woollen article, cigarettes, and chocolate. For the Polish officers I secured three dozen handsome woollen pullovers. I had, however, completely forgotten Colonel Sok's ideas of national honour, and when on the morning of the 24th he called at my office, in innocent pride I showed him the pullovers. Instantly adopting his ceremonious manner, and switching over from Polish to English—which always boded something unpleasant—he said, 'I do not think that any of my comrades will accept these presents', implying by this that they were not beggars and could dispense with charity. I said nothing, even though I felt like chuckling. For all the younger Polish officers had visited me already, had expressed their delight with the gifts, and had made their individual choice.

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Christmas supper took place in the men's big dining-room, decorated attractively by the Polish airmen, who were so much better in all aesthetic matters than were their far less imaginative British colleagues. The Poles acted as our hosts, and the small contingent of British officers arrived as guests. We were received at the door by Colonel Sok who kissed every lady's hand—several ladies from the Polish Embassy in London had arrived for the occasion—thus instantly giving the occasion a strongly un-British imprint.

When everyone was assembled the Colonel read out a speech in English, which he did solemnly and with a good deal of self-dramatization. Then a Polish airman made a short speech in Polish, welcoming the British guests and presenting the C.O. with a handsome illuminated address. The C.O. replied briefly and without notes, almost modestly and very impressively. I translated his speech, and then Colonel Sok addressed the troops in Polish wishing them an early Christmas back at home. This time he did not resort to histrionics, which he appeared to reserve solely for the benefit of the British, and spoke from the heart and with sincerity.

The more intimate part of the ceremony began when the Polish padre broke the first wafer with Colonel Sok, who then shared it with one Polish officer and one Polish airman, both of whom he kissed three times on each cheek. The padre then advanced towards the C.O. and Mrs. Milder and broke the wafer with them. After a general sharing of wafers we marched towards the end of the hall where a long table had been prepared. Walking among the rows of long tables I noticed with pleasure that by each knife and fork there lay one of 'my' presents, neatly tied up with a coloured ribbon.

The evening went off successfully, and after the airmen had sung Polish carols, the British party rose to leave their hosts with their memories. Outside, the roads were covered with ice and the moon was diffusing a bluish light.

XX

DIARY

This has been a rather more tiring Christmas than I had anticipated.

8 a.m. Breakfast. Only one officer in the dining-room. Everyone else apparently still asleep.

8.30. Delivered at the C.O.'s house my Christmas presents for him and his wife.

8.40. Reached H.Q., empty, cold, and dirty. Spent a busy hour and a half packing and arranging for the transport of the several hundred presents for our own troops to await them on their tables at lunch.

10.15. Visit to Polish H.Q. to wish Colonel Sok and his staff a happy Christmas. Much saluting, shaking of hands, and bowing.

11. Roman Catholic service, but only for twenty minutes, for at 11.30 the C. of E. service begins.

11.33. Back to the officers' mess where a deputation from the sergeants'

mess conveys their Christmas greetings. Thank God, for once no rank distinctions. Innumerable drinks.

12. Visit to men's dining-room. They sit tightly packed together like sardines in a tin. My presents lie in front of each man. Officers wait upon the men.

12.20. Return visit to the sergeants' mess, where officers are entertained. More drinks. Both among the officers and the N.C.O.s many find it difficult to keep upright. 'You're a lovely fellow, lovely fellow', an elderly Flight Sergeant keeps on telling me, making me blush violently and causing roars of laughter. (I can never quite grasp why the Saviour's birth should be celebrated by inducing oblivion of all reality and a descent to subhuman levels.)

1.10. Luncheon at the C.O.'s house. Besides the hosts, Colonel Sok, the Chief Administrative Officer and myself. Excellent food.

3.30. Back to the mess crowded with chattering groups. Withdrew into an easy chair and fell asleep at once. Woke up twenty minutes later when the gong announced tea.

5.30. A game of badminton with the C.O. in the gymnasium. Wonderful exercise and great fun, but my game was rotten.

7. Am told that it is our first 'dinner night' which everyone has to attend. Frantic return to my room and an even more frantic changing of clothes.

7.30. Dinner. The dining-room is decorated in British and Polish colours; the top table moreover with flowers and ribbons. The chairman for the evening is our new chief instructor, who is also Mess President. On his right sits Colonel K., the Polish Air Attaché from London; then Group Captain Milder, then the padre; on his left, Colonel Sok, then myself and then Squadron Leader K., formerly the senior Polish officer. The Polish padre says grace in Latin; after dinner the Mess President says it in English, 'For all we have received, thank God'. Then the toast of our King and of the President of the Polish Republic. Colonel Sok greatly impressed by the proceedings. So are his officers. A dinner night with its many traditions and customs is a novelty to them and appeals strongly to their sense of the theatrical. Everyone on his very best behaviour—even our 'old gang', who normally are impressed by nothing except the available amount of drink.

9.30. Dinner is over and the C.O. leads Colonel Sok and the Air Attaché with mock ceremoniousness into the billiard room where in the presence of everyone, the four senior officers, two Polish and two British, begin the traditional game of snooker. Much teasing of the illustrious but not particularly skilful players. Spirits rise high.

11.30. And so to bed.

I did not find it very easy to adjust myself to the rhythm of Christmas in the service. Even at the best of times celebrating, overeating, and being idle had but a limited appeal for me. At Sleethole, where an urgent job had to be carried through, any waste of time soon made me feel impatient, and so I found idleness, as opposed to rest, hard to enjoy. Once or twice during Christmas I tried to read a serious book or do some private work,

but failed completely. My diary was my sole private occupation. Evidently I still had to acquire a greater sense of detachment and learn to treat my job less seriously.

XXI

During the first two weeks the Poles were very eager to get on with their English. After dinner the whole anteroom would be engrossed in English grammar, Berlitz books or '1,000 words in English'. The officers would be writing sentences into copybooks, memorizing words or holding heated debates as to the pronunciation of this or that word. Finally, they would drift towards me to ask if we could form a reading circle in which everyone in turn read for a few minutes from the day's newspaper. Unfortunately, the original fire soon burnt down to a mild flicker. Here and there a few enthusiasts still kept their noses to English primers, but the majority busied themselves with less arduous tasks. They either crowded the library where, in an atmosphere blue and unbearable with smoke and stuffiness, they devoted themselves to bridge and poker, or played snooker, or sat about in the music-room singing and playing the piano and, above all, gossiping.

When the Polish officers first arrived, their main concern had been to get on as quickly as possible with the job of preparation for their forthcoming fights against the Germans. But other interests soon appeared to supervene. It was evident that the hospitality and generosity with which they had been received had taken them by surprise; and on the other hand most of the British personnel tended to sentimentalize about their guests, forgetting that since their own standards of living were much higher than those of the Poles, the latter were bound to have their heads turned. Man always finds it easier to get accustomed to and to take for granted those conditions above rather than those below his former station. Automatically such an advance also raises his ambitions. Having soon discovered that England meant plenty, our guests, not unnaturally, raised their expectations. Once the problems of their personal security and of their training were assured, they indulged increasingly in talk which centred round questions of rank and promotion, uniforms and rings on sleeves, which resulted in the inevitable pushing behind the scenes and jockeying for positions. On several days in succession the new Polish Air Force padre visited my office, asking whether he was sure to be given his original rank of Squadron Leader and whether he would be allowed to put the three rings on his sleeve at once.

Yet another change became perceptible in the attitude of the Polish officers: upon their arrival they had treated their British colleagues with a warmth and respect amounting almost to deference. From the day their new uniforms arrived from London and the rings on their sleeves proclaimed visibly that they were no longer refugees in ill-fitting mufti, but officers of the R.A.F., things became different. The seniors among them

approached us with a cold indifference that at times amounted to haughtiness. If I personally was not affected by the change, this was merely due to the fact that they regarded me as the C.O.'s representative and knew of my close association with him. And the C.O.'s prestige, fortunately, was extremely high.

The R.A.F. pay which our guests received appeared to be in the case of officers more than twice and in that of the men almost five times that of their pay in Poland. Many of them were young, and this sudden bounty tended to turn their heads.

The C.O. was worried about all this. No man could have flung himself with greater enthusiasm into his task; no-one on British soil was a more warm-hearted friend of the Poles. I knew that he had received warning that too much generosity on his part might be interpreted as weakness, nevertheless he did not allow himself to be guided by anything but his warm-hearted humanity.

DIARY

Possibly I may be too critical in these notes. Yet I know that the truth about our venture will never emerge from any official chronicle or blue book, where for political or kindred reasons the too vivid colouring will be toned down, and the rougher edges smoothed. And a personal record, if it is to be of any value to myself and those who one day may read it, must be one of facts exactly as I see them from my central observation point.

One of the most inspiring features of our show was the attitude of our own airmen. Most of them had never been in direct touch with foreigners and might have felt justified in regarding the Poles as intruders and treating them with suspicion. Yet their enthusiasm surpassed even the most optimistic expectations. During the days before Christmas several of them had drifted into my room, asking permission to invite a Pole to spend the holidays with them and with their families. Or they had pulled scribbled notes out of their pockets and begged me to give them the right pronunciation of this or that Polish word. Many of them were learning Polish—one of the most difficult European languages for a Briton to learn.

During the first boxing match at our station the C.O. made a brief speech from the stage. When in the course of his address he expressed his pleasure at having the Poles amongst us the clapping and cheering of our men nearly brought the roof down. They continued this for several minutes and finally the C.O. was forced to raise his hand and ask them to stop. There was something deeply moving about this spontaneous warm-heartedness on the part of our airmen. It indicated not merely their sympathy with a brave and defeated nation but equally their inborn humanity, which was shown every day in countless other examples. Was I wrong in concluding that that type of spontaneous decency was the surest sign of true civilization? It would have been foolish to make any facile deductions, but I must put on record that, according to the Poles, in Hungary, Rumania, and even France—countries with records of long-standing

friendship with Poland—they had met with individual sympathy but on the whole had been treated with indifference and often with suspicion. There may have existed good reasons for the attitude of the Hungarians, Rumanians, and the French, but similar reasons might have been valid in Britain as well. Evidently, however, in Britain there were other factors at work that proved stronger than those making for indifference and suspicion.

XXII

The day after Christmas I had my first experience of being orderly officer. I knew next to nothing about my duties except that throughout the day I should have to wear round my arm a band on whose badly soiled ground were the letters O.O. At eleven I visited the stores to check the daily rations for the various cookhouses: so many pounds of butter, cheese, so many pots of marmalade, bought or used. The only item that surprised me was twenty-five pounds of currants: it seemed a lot for a pudding for two hundred men. At noon I inspected the kitchens and dining-rooms. The duty sergeant led me from table to table, asking each time if there were any complaints. I should hardly have lent a sympathetic ear if someone had ventured to complain, for the food looked and tasted infinitely better than ours at the officers' mess. On each plate there were two slices of excellent beef with green peas and baked potatoes and on another plate a heap of luscious rice pudding almost black with currants!

I was more apprehensive about my night duties which were to consist chiefly of deciphering incoming signals. Though at Manhill I had been taught the guiding principles of various codes, I had never done any actual deciphering. In the morning Snithers had given me the keys to the signal room at H.Q. where the codes were kept, and had assured me that it was all quite simple. 'I've done it all my life, old boy, money for jam, and such fun. You'll love it.'

For once Snithers was right, though not quite in the sense in which he had meant it.

Late at night I went into the O.O.'s bedroom, quite resigned to find myself disturbed as soon as I went to sleep and forced to walk across the camp to H.Q. to decode incoming signals. When after going to bed I was awakened by the telephone, it was six o'clock. I hadn't been disturbed once. I inquired whether there had been no signals and was told that quite a few had come. Why hadn't I been notified? Because in accordance with the C.O.'s orders, issued on the previous night, the signals were to be taken to and deciphered by the Duty Officer and no longer by the O.O.

At eight, at breakfast, I met the Duty Officer. 'Did you have a good night?' I asked cheerfully.

Instead of replying he gave me what I took to be a dirty look, and then he explained. 'From eleven o'clock until five this morning signals were

coming in every quarter of an hour. Only finished at seven, not a wink of sleep; I've just had a bath and a shave. Bloody things signals, not a single one had anything to do with us. To hell with them.'

XXIII

DIARY

For the first time in my life I find myself skating on thin ice, and more than ever am I longing for the spirit of comradeship at Manhill. At Sleet-hole my position and responsibilities on the one hand, and my rank on the other, are separated by a gulf which in a community that assesses everything in terms of rank, easily makes for jealousies.

Whereas in H.Q. the reasons for jealousy are professional, in the mess the suspicion with which I am often met derives from the fact that I do not play cards, do not drink, and do not readily join in a certain type of after-dinner conversation. Having all my life been deficient in the sense of drink or cards, I am not prepared to take up either merely for the sake of gaining a dubious popularity. Sex experiences seem to me far too personal to be a subject for conversation with people who are practically strangers, and my colleagues' accounts of which barmaid said yes and what happened afterwards, quite frankly bore me. Yet if you stand outside the brotherhood forged by the three common links—drink, cards, and smuttiness—the 'old gang' consider you a highbrow and a prig and you have forfeited all claims to popularity.

The reasons for professional jealousies are even easier to tabulate. Except for the C.O. and myself, none of the officers at H.Q. is particularly keen on our present task. None of them has been specially trained for the Polish show, and it is inevitable that my own position should have become rather more pronounced than has that of any other junior officer, and more, indeed, than is welcome to me. I have made the mistake of letting my enthusiasm run away with me, and enthusiasm or qualifications not backed by a corresponding rank are more likely to be a handicap than not. I am grateful that before I came here I held the lowest commissioned rank, which enabled me to live among the junior officers who are the true salt of the R.A.F. Had my rank been higher I should have been robbed of much that has made my early weeks in the service so memorable to me. At Sleet-hole, as a F.O., I do not possess the hierarchic authority which seems indispensable for the C.O.'s personal assistant and liaison officer.

Some of my colleagues senior to me take a delight in demonstrating to me the power inherent in rank and have even evolved a special strategy to keep me 'in my place'. As a rule, I report to the C.O. in the morning as soon as he arrives at H.Q., and he then discusses the work for the day. For the last few mornings the 'old gang' have been lining up outside the C.O.'s room before his arrival so as to call on him before I have made my morning report. When on the first day of this conspiracy I tried to enter his room I was stopped and greeted by what was meant to be good-natured chaff, 'Nothing doing, old man, an F.O. comes after an F.L.' So nowadays my

report is delayed by an hour or two which I spend kicking my heels and contemplating some of the less orthodox aspects of infantile psychology. The C.O. has too many worries as it is for me to trouble him with accounts of the retarded development among some of his officers. And though on several occasions he has mentioned that he was going to follow up Mr. Braynelaw's decision in respect to my rank, I do not like to remind him of it. Moreover, though promotion may become of some assistance in my dealings with the Poles, no superficial change is likely to prove an effective antidote to Sleethole's atmosphere.

From the moment I discovered the first signs of trouble in our venture, I have felt an inner conflict whenever I came to jot down my daily notes, for I know that to focus one's attention on what is negative is as harmful to one's peace of mind as it is valuable to concentrate on what is positive. Nevertheless these daily entries are increasingly given up to criticism. I should deplore this less if I felt that this critical attitude was only temporary. Unfortunately, I suspect that the opposite is true. At Manhill I knew that whatever undesirable features I might have observed or recorded were related merely to the surface of Manhill's existence, and had little, if any, effect upon its true spirit. Consequently, they left me personally untouched. Here, however, I seem to be reaching more and more the very centre of what is negative. I cannot escape from it and find myself unceasingly caught up in it. What is hostile and alien at Sleethole appears to be part of the very 'personality' of the place. Who would be so foolish as to deny that places like human beings have their inherent atmosphere, or call it spiritual individuality, and that there may be something intrinsically good or evil about this, irrespective of its external features? Here, moreover, even the external features add to the demoralizing influences of the 'spiritual' atmosphere.

XXV

The new year started for me with a duty journey to London. I also applied for an additional twenty-four hours that would enable me to spend the night at home.

Sussex was covered with snow and under its white cloak the garden at home appeared even more peaceful than usual. After a morning fog the sun emerged through a pale blue sky. I took the dogs with me and went to call on friends whom I had not seen since I joined up. The village looked deserted. A. was in the *Hood* somewhere in the Atlantic; B. in a cruiser was chasing the *Deutschland*; C. was up in the north with his regiment; D. was in a destroyer in the Mediterranean. Not one of the men was present, and only the older farm hands and the boys were at home. But the bearing of the wives was impressive. It seemed to me that it was the women who were suffering most acutely. The long and solitary evenings in the deserted village must have been hard to bear. Mrs. A. met me calm and composed, but the thought of her husband and son, both at sea, overshadowed her all the time like a threatening cloud. Though we didn't speak of the war, once or twice I felt as though she might break down.

There was a constant quiver at the corners of her mouth and a haunted look in her eyes. It obviously needed a supreme effort of will to hold back the tears.

Mrs. B., my housekeeper, kept herself frantically busy, stoking the fires, cooking excellent meals, rushing about and doing a hundred superfluous things for me. She was flushed and her eyes were shining with joy—or was it merely that she too was struggling to hold back tears? In bustling about without sitting down for a single moment she was evidently trying to show her anxiety, sympathy, pleasure at my being back, as well as many other things that could not be put into words.

The C.O. had given me permission to bring my dogs with me. It was not merely out of selfishness that I had decided to do so. Since Mrs. B.'s health prevented her from leaving the house except to go to church on Sundays, the wretched dogs were deprived of all exercise. Wasn't it enough if humans, who could not escape from it, suffered from the war?

The dogs' first experience of a railway journey must have been terrible for them. By the time we left, a thick fog had descended and there was slush underfoot. The trains were crowded and dark, and five times we had to change, skidding along black platforms, with the ghostly silhouettes of hurrying Sunday travellers adding the quality of a nightmare to the general scene. We were four hours late, and when we finally arrived at Sleethole it was 11 p.m. But once the dogs were established in my room and had done justice to a hearty meal, they were apparently quite happy.

Two days after my return from home the C.O. came up to me in the passage in H.Q. and drew my attention to a paragraph in Station Regulations according to which everyone who kept a dog had to be issued with a special disc.

'I never knew anything about this regulation,' he said, 'but yesterday one of your particular "friends" pointed out to me that you had not complied with this rule. So I should advise you to do what is necessary before I am sent an official complaint about you.'

I thanked him and went straight away to see the adjutant who knew more about Sleethole and its ways than anyone dead or alive. I told him that I had heard about the regulation and wished to comply with it.

'What regulation? I've been here for twenty years and have never heard of such nonsense. No-one at Sleethole has ever had a disc for his dog.'

When I insisted, he finally said, 'Well, apply to the police sergeant in the guard-room', which I did without further loss of time. So both Barté and Billfox were provided with discs bearing their newly acquired numbers, one and two. Instead of attaching these to their collars I displayed the insignia of their legality prominently on my writing-table at H.Q., so that no-one who came into my room could miss seeing them. Not even my friend Snithers.

XXVI

Each day afresh it surprised me that it should have been so difficult to make our organization run efficiently. Possibly, as in every branch of the armed services throughout the country, our own expansion was proceeding at so rapid a pace that efficiency was bound to be left behind. A weekly increase by some two hundred and fifty new arrivals at a station that only a few weeks before had been little more than an empty shell, represented a rate of expansion as great as any in the country. Nevertheless such routine problems as providing accurate nominal rolls or workable timetables for lectures and co-ordinating the work of different departments should not have proved unsurmountable. And yet they would often appear so. Most of our officers had experience in their particular sphere, and there existed no apparent reason for exceptional difficulties. Since nevertheless our machinery refused to run smoothly, this seemed to me due chiefly to the spirit of the place and its influence upon many of its inmates. Questions of rank and departmental prestige were of far greater moment to them than the actual job. With a few exceptions, they regarded the service as an opportunity for securing any privileges it may have had to offer. When I first joined up I imagined in my innocence that everyone who had volunteered had done so because of patriotism or, at any rate, because in war-time such service was the only thing that mattered. Sleethole revealed to me that some of the older men at any rate had volunteered because their pre-war work had come to an end or had become less profitable, or because in the R.A.F. they would be better off than they would have been had they remained in 'civvy street', or for other equally ulterior reasons. Most of them did not even attempt to disguise their motives and admitted them without any shamefacedness. They treated the Polish show with indifference and were little interested in its smooth running. They probably thought it just as legitimate to join an armed service because one's business had suffered through the war, as to do so for reasons of patriotism; but I did not find it easy to get used to this idea, the devotion and idealism among the youngsters at Manhill having intensified my original views on the subject.

The progress of any communal venture in war-time seemed to depend chiefly upon the enthusiasm of a few individuals; at Sleethole it happened to be Group Captain Milder. Such men as he could throw themselves wholeheartedly into a job so that it became more important to them than any personal questions. Is it not always a small minority that causes civilization to advance?

But what were my own apprehensions as compared to those of the C.O., who knew that there was opposition to him at his own station? The 'old gang', as we called the most hidebound opposition group at the station, put up passive resistance to anything which did not happen to suit them. To convert them or to eliminate their influence appeared to be

beyond anyone's power, for with a rapidly expanding and sadly understaffed Air Force it was impossible for the C.O. to pick and choose the administrative personnel. As well as enthusiasm, our particular job required a type of mind that could adapt itself easily to constant changes. Our problems varied almost from day to day, and cast-iron routine or mental sluggishness were of little use. The evident lack of emotional impetus or mental flexibility on the part of many of his collaborators naturally depressed the C.O., who would find himself compelled to spend long hours each day doing the work which his junior officers should have done for him.


Like every normal human being he often felt the need of unburdening himself. At such moments he would confess that he knew quite well that neither he nor I, in my far less exalted position, was much beloved by the 'old gang' who, apparently reproached me for 'siding' with him instead of with them. But he assured me that he would protect me 'through thick and thin'. I feared, however, that he was essentially too honest and too human to remain unmoved by the swirling eddies that perpetually threatened to undermine our venture.

XXVII

Several of the Polish officers gave me some illuminating details about the escape of their troops from Rumania, where they had found sanctuary after their retreat from Poland. To enable them to leave Rumania, large sums had to be spent by the Polish authorities in bribes. This form of transaction, however, appeared to have been quite common in that country. Her Home Secretary was paid three million lei (roughly a thousand pounds) by the Poles, and as a result gave orders to his officials that exit visas should be given to their Polish guests. In addition, most passport, police, and custom officials had to be bribed individually. The German Embassy at Bucharest tried to prevent the exodus of so considerable a consignment of trained Polish warriors, mainly Air Force men, but even their power was shattered by Rumanian ingenuity. On one occasion the Polish officer who told me the story was leading two Polish parties out of Rumania, one of four hundred men and one of three hundred. When his men arrived at their place of embarkation, the German Air Attaché from Bucharest appeared upon the scene, clamouring that according to international law, no military personnel could leave the country. In the passports of some three hundred of the departing Poles their peace-time professions were stated, farmers, tradesmen, students, etc. The German attaché had nothing against that batch going on board the ship. The majority, however, possessed only their military papers and the Hun insisted that these four hundred men must return to their camp. The final control of exit visas was arranged by the Rumanians for the evening. The first three hundred with their civilian passports were allowed to board the ship, but instead of handing over their passports to the ship's captain, the bribed Rumanian officer in charge of the proceedings retained

these passports and used them now for the four hundred who possessed only their military papers. In the darkness, the photographs on the passports were of no importance. By retaining a hundred passports from the second consignment, he enabled the whole lot of seven hundred men to depart.

The officer who told me this had been anxious to retain some of his military mementoes, his revolver, decorations, and a dagger. There were strict orders that no things of this kind were to be taken out of Rumania. So what he did was to place on the top of his suitcase a five-hundred lei note (a few shillings), and each time his suitcase was opened, the Rumanian official removed the banknote without further examination of the luggage, whereupon the officer would immediately put a fresh five-hundred lei note there for the benefit of the next official.



Chapter Two

CONFLICTS

I

The new year was only a few days old when the C.O. called me into his room to tell me that the Air Ministry had just approved my promotion to acting Flight Lieutenant, and he advised me immediately to add the second ring to my sleeve.

I had hoped to let my promotion pass by as unobtrusively as possible, but such an occasion called for 'throwing a party', which just meant standing everyone drinks, and I simply had to go through with it.

In the afternoon the station tailor put the second ring on to my sleeves and when after six, I got back to the mess I felt self-conscious and buried my hands deep in my pockets. A dozen of us were standing in front of the fireplace when suddenly someone exclaimed, 'Hello, old man, this means drinks all round, we must celebrate.' A few of those present congratulated me; others pretended that they were unaware of the cause of the commotion. I rang the bell and asked the steward to take orders from everyone present.

How I should have enjoyed celebrating the occasion at Manhill! How I should have enjoyed being really and recklessly extravagant and spending a month's pay in one brief evening! And I flattered myself to think that at Manhill the congratulations of my colleagues would have been sincere.

A middle-aged F.L. with a fat belly, a waxed moustache, and a red complexion, whose working path never crossed mine, came up to me in what I took to be a mood of festive jollity. 'I wish you could tell me, old man,' he trumpeted at the top of his voice, 'how one manages to get another ring. I'm sure I could never rise to it. Steward, a double whisky and half a can.' His words were evidently lacking in that minimum of subtlety that prudence, if nothing else, demanded, for several of those present smiled with embarrassment, while others pretended not to have heard the remark. Yet the culprit was merely expressing what probably was in the minds of many.

The drinking continued till seven-thirty when I had to go to dinner, for I had promised the Poles to give them another English lesson at 8 p.m. All the younger Polish officers approached me one by one to congratulate me. I felt myself blushing when I passed through the door leading to the dining-room, and involuntarily overheard the words of a group of Poles who had not noticed me: 'Here at last is a promotion that is deserved. It should have happened long ago.' But my trial wasn't over. Rollicking gaily, the red-faced officer followed me up into the dining-room and,

getting hold of my sleeve, shouted, 'And don't forget to let me know Mrs. Beeton's recipe how to make the C.O. give a good fellow another ring.' An army officer standing near by gave the drunken man a violent push in the back whispering, 'Stop it, you dam' fool'. Collecting himself for a moment and trying to turn the whole thing into a joke the F.L. added, 'And let me know how you manage to keep your schoolgirl complexion'. One of the Poles, already seated at dinner, looked up towards me, and when I gave him a smile he said in Polish, 'A drunken man is the same animal all over the world'.

II

DIARY

At Manhill and Bentley it was so easy to make friends irrespective of difference in rank that in neither place did I have an opportunity to learn that one feels never more lonely than when one is alone in a crowd.

To-day is Sunday. Spent the morning in H.Q. and did some work. Then the C.O. arrived and we discussed outstanding jobs. At twelve went to the mess where I was told that the old gang were 'throwing a terrific cocktail party' in the music room. Am among those who have not been invited. Took the dogs for a walk round the camp after lunch, but the only place here where I find any peace of mind at all is my office. Work is becoming the sole drug that helps me to forget Sleethole. Among the new arrivals there are several officers, foremost among them Wing Commander Bullard, our new chief instructor, who haven't yet had time to become affected by the local spirit, and who keep away from the gang. Bullard is a grand old Yorkshireman who has been in the R.A.F. since the last war and who has worked his way up from an A.C.2. With his keen sense of humour and shrewd knowledge of men he is, next to the C.O., the chief asset of the place. Then there are two new medical officers, men whose talk is not merely of drink, and who are too intelligent to be interested in parochial gossip. But they are married, live outside the station, and though we get on well together, there aren't enough opportunities to get to know them more intimately.

The majority of our officers is composed of the old mushroom variety whose mustiness thrives particularly well in Sleethole's damp atmosphere. Quite a few of them are only temporarily attached to our station. Their recently acquired commissions represent a sudden elevation to an unaccustomed status and there would seem to be nothing that they enjoy more than the exercise of their new power. How well I understand T. E. Lawrence, who preferred to identify himself with the anonymous world of the ranker rather than to spend his R.A.F. days among the type of people for whom service is synonymous with rank and privilege. Though life has taught me that we should keep our most courteous manners for the benefit of those whom we feel inclined to treat with least courtesy, I made little show of pretending to derive enjoyment from either the spurious heartiness or the genuine snobbery of the 'old gang'. Since my contacts are chiefly confined to the Poles

and the C.O., and our paths do not cross, theoretically it should not be difficult to avoid stepping on their corns or having one's own stepped on. Yet they do their best to create more difficulties than there are already. They often tempt me to apply for transfer to an operational squadron. Yet I know that I mustn't run away, not only because of the C.O. and of the Polish venture but also because their presence and attitude suggest that there is a lesson for me to learn at Sleethole which I do not seem to have learned before. When I first volunteered I was driven partly by the urge to face reality. Well, 'reality' for me evidently does not consist in going on raids and behaving like a 'hero' but in learning how to put up with certain aspects of human nature that were unknown to me in the past. Anyhow, I must stick it out until our show has begun to run more smoothly. Fortunately I have got the dogs with me.

III

The food which could never claim to be one of the strong points of the officers' mess had become so bad after the New Year that even those who had ruined their palates by drinking throughout the morning would leave their plates practically untouched. Though I appreciated good food, I was perfectly contented with one plain but cleanly cooked course. But however unassuming my demands, the leathery slab of beef swimming in cold and dirty gravy and a sweet which was either too tough or too watery, and in either case often embellished by a broken match, a cigarette stump, or hair, were too much even for me. Most of us were reduced to concentrating on cheese, biscuits, and fruit which, incidentally, formed the most expensive items on our catering bill. From very much the same meat and other produce which in our own mess were rendered uneatable, the chef in the men's quarters produced a variety of delicious dishes, such as onion steaks, savoury pies, appetizing rissoles, even spicy goulashes. But the spirit of Sleethole, which seemed to be most virulent around the officers' quarters, was responsible not merely for our kitchen and whatever powers governed it, but for the whole of the mess. Towels in lavatories would remain dirty for weeks on end and hardly ever would you find any soap there; the carpets on the floor were left untacked and you stumbled over them; in half of the lamps there were no bulbs. Yet with over a hundred officers and a high mess subscription the place could have been run like a first-rate hotel. When I thought of Bentley or Manhill or of the messes I had visited at various aerodromes in Suffolk and compared them with Sleethole, it seemed incredible that our station should form part of the R.A.F. It would have fitted far more appropriately into some dilapidated estate in Ireland.

IV

As a Flying Officer I had escaped from decoding ciphers. As a Flight Lieutenant I no longer could be an Orderly Officer but was Duty Officer

and as such had to do the deciphering. It was part of the cursed way of ciphers that they would not come in till late in the evening. On my first day as Duty Officer the only exception was the first cipher which arrived at tea-time. Wing Commander Bullard was kind enough to come with me into the duty officer's room where the safe with the codes was kept, and helped me in my first decoding effort. The pause that followed lasted six hours, and the ciphers did not begin to come in until half-past ten.

In my days of ignorance decoding seemed to me romantic and I thought that great ingenuity was required for it. In actual fact all that was needed was patience and the ability to subtract figures correctly. After I had spent some three hours playing about with elementary mathematics I realized that I was rather deficient in the virtue of patience and I began to curse. I had had a long and tiring day with over twelve hours' work and could have carried on more easily had I seen any rhyme or reason in what I was doing. But not a single one of the many messages that robbed me of my night's rest had anything whatever to do with our station. The important intelligence that they revealed consisted of a new number for a buoy in the Atlantic, a new signal in the Shetlands, a message to a command in Pretoria and another one divulging that in a fortnight's time a certain aeroplane would be flying over North Wales. Yet the individual ciphers were long, each one demanding at least half an hour's work. At three in the morning signal station rang me up to announce that a very urgent message had just come through. Ten minutes later the wretched messenger had climbed the hill from the camp to our mess and delivered the important signal, which consisted of ninety-six groups. I sweated over it for more than an hour, and found that it contained the staggering information that a service car that had disappeared from a Midland aerodrome, had changed its plate number, and had last been seen in Cumberland.

When I threw myself, a disappointed and disgruntled wreck, on to my bed it was five o'clock. Was it really necessary, I wondered, for officers who had full-time jobs, to spend whole nights decoding messages that had no relevance whatsoever to the station concerned? In the mess at breakfast, even my particular 'friends' agreed with me that the whole procedure verged on insanity and that something should be done to make our betters realize that this particular bit of service routine did little to increase an officer's knowledge, morale, wellbeing, or devotion to the service.

V

One morning during the colour-hoisting parade a Polish officer lost his temper with one of his men who, in turn, behaved insolently. The officer was apparently unpopular with the troops, and when he ordered the culprit, who was particularly popular among his fellows, to report in the evening, all the airmen jeered. Loss of temper on the part of an officer during colour-hoisting parade and jeering by the troops would naturally

be regarded in the R.A.F. as a very serious breach of discipline, to say the least. When the C.O. heard of what had happened he took an extremely grave view of the incident. He asked me immediately to summon the two senior Polish officers—Colonel Sok being away, Wing Commander R. and Squadron Leader K. had to come. I acted as interpreter. At first the Poles failed to realize the full gravity of the offence and the C.O. had to explain to them the R.A.F. point of view. Once they grasped the full significance of the incident, however, they were eager to make that point of view their own. In consequence throughout the day there were solemn faces and ceaseless hubbub in Polish H.Q., and the mess turned into a beehive of whispered conversations. The C.O. asked to be handed a report by 7 p.m. Punctually at seven, the two senior officers called again at my office and handed it over. I translated it for the C.O. who was to pronounce his verdict next day.

In their report the Poles not only unreservedly accepted the C.O.'s stern point of view as to the gravity of the offence but even suggested a punishment the severity of which surprised the C.O. himself. It was to consist in expelling both the guilty officer and the airman from Sleethole and sending them back to France to report to the Polish military prosecutor. When the C.O. asked them in the morning whether so severe a sentence might not produce unfavourable reactions among their troops, they assured him with alacrity that these would welcome a stern verdict.

The arguments that the Poles put forward in defence of their case were far from unconvincing. It was probably inevitable that a defeated army should regard their officers as partly responsible for their misfortunes, so that as a result their respect for their superiors would be undermined. According to the Polish officers themselves, this was exactly what had happened in their Air Force, and what added so considerably to our difficulties at Sleethole. The months in Rumanian and French camps had done little to improve either morale or discipline. In addition to all this, one of our own officers, even more deficient in tact than in intellect, had been doing his best to undermine still further the discipline of the Polish airmen. The report of his tactics, corroborated by a great many statements on the part of Polish airmen, made the poor C.O. almost speechless. When the Polish troops had asked the particular officer which of their own officers would lead them back to France to resume their fight against Germany, that bright bird had replied that no appointments made by Polish H.Q. at Sleethole would have any validity whatsoever, because no-one on the British side trusted the Polish officers, and all future appointments would be made by British H.Q. ! On another occasion he had issued orders to the Polish troops contrary to those given them by their own senior officers, and when questioned on this point, he had replied that the order of any British officer overruled those of any Polish officer. It was not surprising that men fed on this sort of information failed to treat their officers with respect and that the latter's authority was easily undermined.

If I had still been a plain civilian I should have regarded the gravity

with which the incident was treated by the whole of Sleethole as exaggerated and might have found something humorous in all these conferences, solemn faces, ceremonial salutes, and austere reports. I should probably have felt outraged at the penalty inflicted upon the two guilty men and should have deplored the fact that these people who had just begun a new life and were looking forward to a productive future and finally to fighting the enemy, were being pushed back into the idleness and misery of a demoralizing camp in France, with the addition of military dishonour. But apparently I had been in the service too long to allow myself to be moved by ordinary common sense, and to feel nothing but pity and to see nothing but the human side of the incident. I was genuinely horrified to find that I agreed with the cruel verdict.

VI

DIARY

The only road to such contentment as Sleethole—and probably any administrative job in the service—can provide, leads through work. The moment this decreases, doors are flung open to the depredations of gossip, wire-pulling, and finally, for my own part, to worry. In the state of constant nervous tension in which I live these days, I find it easy to lose my sense of proportion and allow myself to be troubled by difficulties which are hardly worth notice. In the thick of work all such minor troubles are quickly forgotten; but unfortunately on many a day the morning rush in my room at H.Q. is followed by hours of idleness. Strangely enough the amount of work I have to do depends primarily upon the sort of influences to which the C.O. has just been exposed. By nature he responds easily to outside pressure, both as regards people and events, and I am the first to feel the effects. On days on which our relationship is untouched by external influences he will push on to me most of his voluminous daily correspondence with the Air Ministry and discuss in detail his plans for the day. On other days he will pass hardly anything on to me and try to do all the work himself. I suppose some of his changing moods are a legacy left over from the early days when he had to give in to higher authority and accept me as his P.A. I dare say if we had been spared those early ambiguities his inner waverings and the resulting difficulties would never arise. Yet I know that in my relationship to him and in my entire job at Sleethole everything depends ultimately upon myself. Are not frictions and external difficulties merely the material manifestations of our own spiritual state? I try to tell myself that if I succeed in being detached and spiritually composed, all difficulties, whether real or imaginary, will melt away. If they don't—and since I sometimes feel that I am becoming increasingly disloyal to my spiritual convictions, they probably won't—there'll be a meaning even in my failure and I shall have to accept it as an inevitable lesson that needs to be learnt.

VII

On the second occasion when I was Duty Officer I rang up the signal station before going to bed and asked them to follow the routine adhered to by all Duty Officers and to send for deciphering during the night only those signals marked 'Urgent'. I was just undressing when Snithers, who as a rule did not spend his evenings at the station but at his home some ten miles away, rushed into my room to make a scene about my request to the signal station. When I explained to him that I had merely followed the custom established by all our Duty Officers, he shouted that he didn't care what others did, and in his official capacity gave me orders to decipher every incoming signal, no matter whether it was urgent or not.

As it happened, only three signals arrived, and by one o'clock I was able to return to bed. At three in the morning the messenger from the signal station appeared in my room and delivered an ordinary telegram *en clair*, addressed to one of our airmen in the camp. Formerly only cipher telegrams had to be dealt with during the night, ordinary telegrams being held back until the morning. Could there possibly have been a mistake on the part of the signal station? I rang them up and asked why they should have bothered to send me a telegram which they themselves could read and which demanded no action. Why had they not followed the usual custom of waiting till the morning? At first the N.C.O. would give me no clear reply, pretending that he was merely following the usual practice. After some pressure he admitted that just before midnight new orders had been issued by Squadron Leader Snithers and that until further notice every telegram was to be sent up instantly to the Duty Officer.

In the morning I reported the night's incidents to the C.O. and told him bluntly that if these pettifogging conditions continued I should beg him to support my appeal to the Air Ministry to release me from my present job and allow me to volunteer for active service. In reply he informed me that Snithers had rung him up at midnight to tell him that he was anxious 'to make Sleethole one hundred per cent efficient, the Number One R.A.F. station in England' and, incidentally, to 'correct the liaison officer's unorthodox methods'. I refrained from asking the C.O. why the said officer's reforming zeal should have been put into operation in the middle of last night and not on an occasion when Snithers himself was Duty Officer.

The C.O. who undoubtedly possessed the gift of restoring one's self-confidence, was most sympathetic, said several flattering things and advised me that in my privileged position I ought to be particularly careful not to give rise to any kind of criticism. Summing up, he remarked that he would hate to see me leave, since there was no-one else at Sleethole whom he could fully trust. He would speak to Snithers and warn him that if I insisted on leaving Snithers would have to go too. He also promised to issue a special minute in which all the officers concerned would be given a

full explanation of what my exact position and duties were. Since many of my colleagues regarded me as an intruder and were unaware of my true functions at Sleethole, such a step might possibly do away with some of the friction and misunderstandings.

The minute which the C.O. sent out the same evening to all the senior officers of both Polish and British H.Q. read:

ALLOCATION OF DUTIES

1. Confirming my conversation with the Adjutant to-day, it is essential that the allocation of duties to officers should be quite clear and some revision of the titles given to officers by virtue of their duty should now be made.

2. *Liaison Officer, Flight Lieutenant R.L.* This officer's duties at this Headquarters are defined as follows:

This officer fulfils a dual role in the organization of this H.Q. In the first place he is carrying out the duties of Personal Assistant to myself in all matters arising out of the organization of the station in so far as the policy regarding the formation of Polish air units is concerned. Consequently, he is called upon to deal with certain questions in the *first place* and *before* they are referred to other branches of this H.Q.

Secondly, he is the liaison officer between the senior Polish officer and myself, in all matters in which the senior Polish officer and myself are concerned in the first place. Any ordinary routine matters requiring discussions between this H.Q. and Polish H.Q. should normally be dealt with by the individuals concerned at both H.Q., if necessary, through an interpreter.

Flight Lieutenant R.L. is in future to be described as the Liaison Officer, and should not be called upon by any branch to deal with Polish H.Q. on matters of detail, except as directed by me.

3. The only other liaison officer connected with this H.Q. is Squadron Leader C. who is attached to the Air Ministry.

(signed) *Group Captain.*

VIII

On the morning following the issue of the C.O.'s minute, Snithers rang me up asking me to be 'kind enough' to call on him, which I did forthwith. With great ado he began to explain that he had never dreamed of working against me and would always 'play' with me. 'But why aren't you like us others, baby? Why aren't you matey? Once you know the old boys intimately, you'll admit that they're a wizard lot, wizard.' The old boys he was referring to were the middle-aged members of the 'old gang', several of them army men. 'Dick and F.B. and myself are a lot of grand lads. Why don't you join us? Take me for example', he went on, suddenly raising his short legs and placing his large feet on the writing-table as if to indicate that he already regarded me as one of the lads and

thus worthy of such a lack of ceremony, 'if you'd really been matey, you'd know by now that I'm a prince among men, a real prince. You're too much of a highbrow—between ourselves, I'm a highbrow myself, always was—but, you know, you're stand-offish; what you need is to join our lot. I really don't understand you, old boy, you talk to N.C.O.s and airmen as if they came from your own class and let even junior Polish officers take up hours of your time; surely they aren't up to our standard, yours or mine, *noblesse oblige*, and all that, you know, old boy—and yet you never have time for what I swear to God Almighty is the swellest lot in the whole R.A.F. Why not let yourself go, baby, and get drunk now and then? None of us will mind; that's the way to get popular in the Air Force. Don't waste your time with the Poles; they come and they go, but the R.A.F. remains for ever, and our crowd'll show you how to enjoy life. What are you in the R.A.F. for if not to enjoy yourself! Leave stand-offishness to the suckers who've remained in civvy street. There's nothing like the R.A.F. if you know how to enjoy it. Now have a cigarette, old boy, and let's shake hands.'

He removed his feet from the table and we shook hands. Though he gave me a broad smile, his bloodshot eyes kept watching me suspiciously. But he went on repeating that he was a sincere friend of mine and that no-one at our station, not even the C.O. himself, appreciated more all that I was doing for Sleethole. 'I know a good worker the moment I see one, and though you're a stuck-up son of a bitch, I always say there's no-one like old R.L. if it comes to work. Well, now we're friends, aren't we? I'll play with you, and let's forget what was.'

Though I was unable to repay him in kind, I assured him that I would forget the past and would be the last to disappoint his desire for collaboration. Just as I was leaving his room, he gave me a wink which no doubt was intended to clinch our new and 'swell' friendship. 'So long, sweetheart,' he exclaimed, 'and don't forget, from now I'll play ball with you.'

While I had been buffeted about between musical comedy and melodrama, the poor C.O. was performing, not altogether successfully, in a comedy of manners. Behind the comedy's unassuming title, 'The Batmen', were concealed such complex problems of psychology, administration, and national idiosyncrasies as only the most courageous dramatist would have dared to tackle.

The number of Polish officers had been increasing rapidly and, consequently, more and more Polish batmen were required. On a number of different occasions Colonel Sok had declared that Polish airmen could not possibly be employed as batmen. Surely we didn't expect a man who was an airman to brush his officer's shoes and uniform or clean his room in the morning? While our own airmen with their considerably higher standards of living performed batmen duties as a matter of course, their Polish colleagues, according to our colonel, could not be expected to demean themselves in a similar manner.

I may have known very little about modern Polish standards, but quite

frankly, I refused to believe Colonel Sok. It might, of course, be that his authority was not sufficiently powerful to enable him to put before his troops proposals that a British C.O. would have issued in the form of ordinary daily routine orders. Yet after months spent in primitive Continental camps in which the Polish airmen were dependent upon the good will and almost the charity of others, and in which their general standards of living could not have been very high, they were not likely to consider batman duties to their own officers beneath their dignity. However important questions of prestige or 'national dignity', as Colonel Sok was pleased to call them, might be, I suspected that it was he rather than his men who showed such concern as to what was fitting for a Polish airman. But he was their senior officer and we could do nothing behind his back.

The British staff of batmen was far too small even for our own needs. Under the existing arrangement, seven British officers had to share one batman, and though we tried hard to obtain some additional ones, it was impossible to secure any. Naturally I shared the C.O.'s view that British airmen should not be made to perform batman duties to Polish officers whose own men were alleged to consider such duties 'beneath their dignity'. I had little doubt that if Group Captain Milder had been in a position to address the Polish airmen direct, every one of them would immediately have volunteered for batman work. But since such a step was out of the question, he merely ordered me to inform Colonel Sok that unless the problem of Polish batmen was solved satisfactorily he would find himself compelled to stop the arrival of further consignments of officers.

When I passed on this information to Colonel Sok, the Polish C.O. completely forgot his customary exquisite drawing-room manners. He even forgot to address me in English. 'You have been pestering me with this question for weeks, yet I've told you over and over again that I can't force a Polish airman to clean an officer's boots. I can do nothing about it.'

Despite his recalcitrant attitude I was determined not to give way and to present him at the earliest opportunity with the C.O.'s ultimatum.

IX

Meanwhile a fresh Polish contingent consisting of nineteen officers and forty-nine men arrived and the question of batmen had to be shelved like so many others. Once again the C.O. suggested that we should visit the new arrivals. The weather was atrocious and the blizzard which had been sweeping across the camp throughout the day turned into a snowstorm of quite exceptional violence. It smote you like a whip and you had to hold your hands in front of your face to protect it.

Besides visiting the dining-room, equipment section, and sick quarters, we also inspected the sleeping quarters. Some of the men had already retired to bed, others were sitting about half-undressed, reading, writing, or chatting. The C.O. was perturbed by the inadequate ration of coal in each hut and gave orders that additional supplies should be provided without delay. His visit on so bitter a night and his deep concern for the

wellbeing of the newcomers naturally aroused the enthusiasm of every one of them. They replied to his questions with shining eyes and responded to his good night with a 'Dobranoc Panie Pułkowniku' (Good night, my Colonel) that in each hut almost brought the roof down.

No finer lot of men than those Polish N.C.O.s and airmen could have been imagined. They seemed devoted to their duties, they responded to the slightest sign of kindness or encouragement, they were alert and very much the stuff of which first-rate fighters are made. Our own N.C.O.s and airmen spoke of them in the highest terms and no complaints had been heard about them. Each time you visited their quarters they made you feel sort of warm and good. Yet while Group Captain Milder had spent several hours tramping through the snowstorm to see to it that the new arrivals were comfortable, none of the Polish officers put in an appearance.

Whereas the Polish airmen responded to every gesture of sympathy with a pathetic gratitude and fully appreciated that at last they had found security, work, excellent living conditions, and good pay, many of their older officers grumbled and would take offence at the slightest provocation. The situation in the Polish camp was, however, in no way dissimilar from that in our own and almost suggested that a commission easily produced a deteriorating effect. Was it not possible that T. E. Lawrence, who lacked neither experience nor the power of observation, was right when he wrote to a friend, ' . . . R.A.F. officers are very unlike R.A.F. airmen. It would not be becoming for me to say which set I preferred; though perhaps it may be deduced from my manner of life.'¹ Among the shortcomings which I saw among the higher Polish ranks at Sleethole—admittedly a very one-sided experience—the foremost were: a too outspoken individualism, egotism, class and rank consciousness, and preoccupation with formalities and externals in general. Few of them seemed to take a real interest in their men outside purely military matters. Often at the end of a day I would ask myself whether the heroism of the Polish troops in their campaign against the Germans might not have borne more fruit if their own high standards had been fully shared by all those who commanded them. Many of the younger and junior officers seemed to be possessed of that spirit. As far as I could judge, the dividing line ran roughly through the Flight Lieutenant's rank and, in so far as age was concerned, through the years between twenty-five and thirty.

As a result of the existing situation the C.O., whose straightforward and enthusiastic nature made it hard for him to imagine that anyone could approach an important task with less single-heartedness than he did, found himself frequently torn between conflicting emotions. He tried his hardest to meet our guests as though traditional British standards of conduct were theirs, and yet seemed to feel that at times a more cautious and sterner method was advisable. This duality in his approach inevitably led

¹ *Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 553.

to vacillations which, in turn, would leave him depressed and damp his enthusiasm.

X

DIARY

Have received to-day a letter from Mr. Braynelaw who has meanwhile condescended to exchange his civilian status for that of an Air Vice-Marshal. 'Incidentally, I heard yesterday from the Foreign Office,' the A.V.-M. writes, 'how tremendously pleased several people were with our efforts, and those in a position to judge appreciate how greatly improved the morale of the Poles becomes once they are in your care or in your clutches.'

XI

Even after several months in the service I did not find it easy to get accustomed to the violent alternations between high-speed activity and complete idleness. I enjoyed the former but abominated the latter. Before the war, waste of time was simply unknown to me. If there was no immediate work, there were books to read, the garden to attend to, walks to be enjoyed. To waste interminable hours in meaningless chatter had no place in my daily scheme. At Sleethole, except for a few hectic hours when most of the work had to be squeezed into the brief period between nine and twelve in the morning, I would often find myself sitting in my office for long stretches of time doing nothing or spending hours in the mess skipping through magazines or engaged in trivial conversation.

Before I joined I had felt anxious as to whether I should find any time for private work; yet when long stretches of idleness were at my disposal, I felt at a loss what to do with them. The effect of the mess upon both individual work and thought was deadening. In the atmosphere of perpetual noise, it was impossible to do any serious reading or writing, and equally so to enjoy good music on the wireless. Among the Poles there were many who were keen on such music, but they soon learned that if they ventured to tune in to a decent concert, one of our own officers was bound to get up, mutter in an offended voice, 'Who the hell has been messing about with the wireless?' and tune in to jazz or low comedy. Either of these can be enjoyable, but uninterruptedly from morning till midnight, except for the brief minutes given up to the news? . . . I had heard rumours that the Poles were going to purchase their own wireless and have it placed in the music room which our own officers visited but rarely; and if this proved to be true, few things would have made me feel more ashamed for Sleethole than this comment on our cultural standards.

I shouldn't have minded even the mental stagnation and the appalling waste of time if my work had dealt more specifically with Air Force matters. But as it was, I found myself involved in political, diplomatic, administrative, educational, and all sorts of other branches, and the R.A.F. seemed nothing but a memory.

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One morning I accompanied the C.O. on a visit to our training centre in which the Poles received R.A.F. education. There were rooms given up to riveting, bomb fuses, splicing, machine-guns, navigation, bomb sights, and each room reminded me of Manhill and Bentley. The longer our visit lasted, the more homesick I felt for the R.A.F. And more acutely than ever the question presented itself to me: what was I going to do once the Polish show was on its feet and the Poles had joined our own operational squadrons? The prospect of spending the rest of the war in some administrative job at Sleethole hardly bore contemplating. Why shouldn't I begin to prepare myself for air-gunnery straight away? I had been playing about with that thought for some time but it needed the visit to our training centre to make it really take root in my mind.

I talked to the C.O., and he agreed that it might be useful to take up air-gunnery seriously. I should probably have made up my mind sooner had I not been swayed by conflicting considerations. The part of my being that wished for no other life but that of the R.A.F. viewed the future in terms of operational service, action, and danger. But there was another part as well, the civilian one, accustomed to security and comfort, which contemplated the future in terms of the past and thus listened to reason rather than to emotion. My sense of duty balanced precariously between these two, vainly attempting to decide which was the right course for me to follow. Should I be more useful in employing the knowledge and experience of many years or in attempting something that thousands of younger men accomplish more efficiently? Taught by experience, I had little doubt that the final decision would be left to fate. And fate, as usual, would probably take an entirely independent line and push me in some unforeseen direction. But since there seemed little sense in sitting with folded arms, waiting for events to take their course, I called on Wing Commander Bullard, our chief instructor, and asked him whether I might join one of his air-gunnery classes. He was most sympathetic and said that he would possibly provide me with an individual instructor, which would obviously save a lot of time. He asked me to return the following Monday to prepare a syllabus. My interview with him made me feel happier than I had been for a long time.

XII

Towards the end of January we were informed that within a fortnight the Secretary of State for Air would pay us an official visit. He would first inspect a guard of honour, then lunch at the mess, and finally, visit the Polish troops at their various activities in our training centre.

If the King himself had been expected, the hubbub in Polish H.Q. could not have been greater. This was not surprising. The visit would symbolize the first official recognition of the Polish Air Force in Britain and contribute towards strengthening the self-confidence of our guests. With the exception of the C.O., hardly any of our officers seemed to grasp what I was compelled to realize so often, namely that the spirit of a

defeated army, deprived of their country and their weapons and vegetating on foreign soil, could not be the same as that of one leading its normal life. However much we may have been irritated by the touchiness or the exaggerations of certain individuals, we had no right to judge them according to our own standards. And because their morale was still shaky and their leadership not always inspiring, we had reason to be grateful to Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw for having induced the Minister to pay Sleet-hole an official visit.

From the moment the news of the visit had reached us, Colonel Sok held conferences almost uninterruptedly with his senior officers, discussing arrangements for the inspection of the guard of honour. That inspection was to be the only item on the programme which required special preparation on the part of the Poles. For all the arrangements concerning the station as a whole were in the hands of the British administration. Yet though the inspection of the guard would take only some five minutes, five times as many hours were spent by the senior Polish officers in discussing this momentous event.

After everything had been more or less settled, Colonel Sok suddenly decided that the Secretary of State should greet the men in Polish. I agreed with him and recommended his suggestion to the C.O. He was amused and said yes. The greeting agreed upon was 'czolem żołnierze' (a rather untranslatable formula, meaning roughly, 'I greet you, soldiers, with my brow—or head'). Half an hour after this had been decided upon, Colonel Sok returned to my room to say that his officers had proposed that the order of the words should be reversed to 'żołnierze czolem'. The following morning he appeared again: they would go back to the original form. And throughout the day he drifted into my room every hour or so, debating whether the Secretary of State should pronounce his greeting immediately upon his arrival, or during the inspection, from a special platform or what not, and whatever Polish H.Q. decided upon was invariably revoked within the hour. Since it was for me to transmit our final arrangements to the Minister's office in London, I was in danger of losing the last shreds of Christian patience that I might ever have possessed, and was beginning to curse the moment when the C.O. and myself pressed Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw into arranging the visit.

Since a British Cabinet Minister might find it difficult to decide how to pronounce the fairly formidable-looking combination of letters 'czolem żołnierze', the C.O. had asked me to prepare a special memorandum with the phonetic spelling, accents, and the desired intonation. And after Colonel Sok and 'my' officers had finally made up their minds as to the correct order and form of the guard inspection, I prepared a long letter in which every detail about what our guest was to do and to see was given. This was sent off by the C.O. to the Minister's private secretary in London.

What a lot of nonsense all this is, I reflected to myself after all the arrangements had been made, revoked, and re-settled again. How much easier life would be without questions of prestige and ceremonies, the

root of which is usually nothing but vanity. Instead of being thrown completely out of gear to give the Secretary of State the opportunity to mispronounce two Polish words, we could have been getting on with our work and bringing the Poles a step nearer to their ultimate aim. But I was contradicting myself even in my silent soliloquies, for I knew that life was not run merely according to what was right in the eyes of reason. The advance of the Poles depended just as much upon the fact that the Secretary of State for Air would meet them and mispronounce these two words as it did upon their daily training at Sleethole.

Since Polish H.Q. were at their best in all matters concerning ceremonial and formalities, we expected that the Polish ensign, to which the Poles naturally attached the greatest importance, would have materialized without any further intervention on our part. Shortly after my original interview in London, a Polish official from London rang me up to inquire about its measurements and promised that he would bring it along on his visit to Sleethole for Christmas. When some time later the C.O. informed Colonel Sok that the King had approved that the Polish Air Force in Britain should have their ensign, the H.Q. across the road were delighted. But no ensign was to be seen.

Two days before the Minister's visit when there was to be the ceremonial hoisting of the Polish and British ensigns, I rang up Polish H.Q. to inquire about the ensign, but no-one knew anything about it. After a great deal of commotion, a telephone call was put through to London. 'The ensign? Wait a minute. Oh yes, I remember. We're going to order it straight away. Will you send the measurements? What . . . for next Saturday? Quite impossible.' So it was decided that the ensign with the white eagle of Poland on its amaranth background would have to be made by British airmen at the R.A.F. Station, Sleethole. In the end, however, it was Mrs. Milder who saved the situation by making it herself.

XIII

In the course of the afternoon preceding the Minister's visit, the cold spell broke and heavy rain began to wash away the snow that had accumulated during the previous fortnight, making Sleethole look even more forbidding and unkempt than usual. Without the thick banks of greying snow the place would look more presentable for the official visit, but during the night it turned cold again and it kept on snowing uninterruptedly throughout the morning. Moreover, there was a strong wind which made walking in the slushy snow very difficult. In consequence, the parade could not take place on the parade ground but had to be transferred to our largest hangar.

At the last moment we discovered that two dozen photographers and an equal number of journalists were coming from London. And yet we had been told all along to treat the Polish show as a closely guarded secret!

The arrangements were that as the C.O.'s Personal Assistant and Liaison Officer, I should go down to the entrance gate in the staff car and there receive our distinguished visitor. I should then lead him to H.Q. where Air Chief-Marshal Wales, one of the highest dignitaries in the R.A.F., who had arrived specially for the occasion, would introduce Group Captain Milder to the Minister. The short drive to H.Q. would enable me to assist the Minister in revising the pronunciation of his Polish greeting.

Our visitor's arrival was scheduled for eleven o'clock, and the parade was to take place a quarter of an hour later and last ten minutes. Before eleven I set out in the smart staff car to our main entrance gate. It was snowing heavily and there was a sharp blizzard. Every time a car approached the camp I adjusted my cap, pulled at my tie and was ready to jump out of the car and make my bow. Finally at eleven-forty-five a large black car with a pennant and in huge red letters the word PRIORITY painted on its windscreen, appeared. It was driven by an R.A.F. driver, and inside it sat the Secretary of State in splendid solitude, with a brownish tweed overcoat and a white woollen muffler.

I opened the door of his car, saluted, and introduced myself.

'You have come to show me the way, haven't you?' the great man addressed me.

'Yes, sir, and if you will permit, perhaps I might be able to assist you in preparing the pronunciation of the Polish greeting.'

His face lit up. 'Come into my car.'

We moved on. The man in the brown tweed coat and white woollen muffler was clasping in one hand a piece of paper. 'I've got it here', he murmured and immediately recited the two words. They might have been Chinese and were as unintelligible as you could make them. When I repeated them slowly with the correct pronunciation, the Minister's face fell. 'They've given me the wrong pronunciation, they've given me the wrong pronunciation,' he muttered in a voice that seemed on the point of breaking into a sob. 'Look, this is something quite different.' He showed me his scrap of paper, and indeed the phonetic spelling written upon it was quite different from the careful instructions which I had prepared for him several days previously. Its phonetics were, in fact, designed in accordance with . . . German pronunciation. I spoke the words slowly several times and the Minister repeated them with the eagerness of a schoolboy. 'Do you think they'll understand now?' 'I'm sure they will. It's getting better each time you say it, sir.' 'I think you'll have to stand by my side and help me', he mumbled, and I felt sorry for the man who had taken so much trouble to prepare himself for the occasion only to discover that some bright 'expert' had led him astray. I suddenly remembered pre-war occasions in London when well-meaning victims of German propaganda would question me whether 'Polish was a sort of bastard offspring of German'.

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We reached the H.Q., outside which the C.O. was waiting with the Air Chief Marshal. A yard or two away stood the station warrant officer, whose job it was to direct the cars. This was the moment for the Air Chief Marshal to introduce the C.O. to our distinguished guest. But the Minister jumped out of the car with unexpected swiftness and, before the Air Chief Marshal had had time to approach him, he shook hands good-naturedly with the warrant officer and only then with the C.O. There was a look of amazement on the warrant officer's face and a glimmer of amused surprise on that of the C.O. It did not often happen that an N.C.O. was greeted by a Cabinet Minister before his commanding officer and an Air Chief Marshal. The only person who didn't notice anything exceptional was the Secretary of State himself, who finally shook hands with the Air Chief Marshal. After having done this, he expressed the wish to 'disappear'. When he returned a few minutes later, we moved on to the hangar.

Inside the hangar the troops who had been waiting since before eleven were ready. Their officers, some of them still wearing their Continental civilian clothes, stood in two long rows behind them and Colonel Sok in front, but what seemed the largest space was occupied by the photographers and journalists.

The troops presented arms, and the Polish officer in command of the guard reported to our guest. 'Sir,' he cried in an English that did fullest credit to my prowess as a teacher, 'your guard of honour is all present and correct.'

This was the great moment for our guest. He stepped forward, raised his grey felt hat and spoke the two fateful words. In the resounding acoustics of the immense hangar they were completely submerged, and even I, who stood close behind him, could not hear whether he had said, 'czolem żołnierz' or some magic invocation in Swahili. But there was no mistaking the force and clarity of the troops' response. In the release of their pent-up emotions and hopes, the cadence of their words, 'czolem, Panie Ministrze'¹ was flung up towards the distant roof like some giant's mighty trophy. They had been waiting impatiently for the moment in which to show the representative of His Britannic Majesty's Government the stuff of which they were made and to give him assurance of their worth and valour as allies. But since for the moment all they were allowed to do was to offer this brief greeting, they put into it their whole hearts and made it rich with warmth and promise, with their love for Poland and their gratitude to Britain. The Minister was taken aback by this tremendous shout, almost barbaric in its passion and splendour. For a second or two he stood there, hesitating, uncertain how to respond to it. He took his felt hat off his head, and put it back again, and looked around as though awaiting the prompter's cue. But our detailed memorandum had omitted to prescribe the correct procedure for this magic moment when Poland's goddess of war spread out her wings.

¹ 'Minister, we greet you with our brow.'

It was the photographers from London who broke the spell. They came to the Minister's assistance and showed him how to step out of the magic circle. They walked noisily into the centre of the stage, and for the next twenty minutes they were the chief performers. They surged round their victim like wasps round a pot of jam, and the guest of honour gratified their demands with patient good humour. Several times he actually asked them, 'Is this how you want me? Shall I take off my hat?' At one moment his pursuers drew so close to him that his slow advance had to come to a halt, and one of them apologized. 'Oh, that's quite all right. You only do your work, I quite understand,' the visitor replied with a kindly grin. He continued to walk past the troops, but the true heroes of the day seemed to be the photographers.

When finally we moved on to the training centre, the inspection of which was supposed to be the chief object of the Minister's visit, there was little time left for the classrooms of the riggers, armourers, electricians, air-gunners, and other fighting men who were relearning their trades. In the training centre Wing Commander Bullard, the chief instructor, was to be the host, but when the Minister stepped out of his car he proceeded to shake hands with whoever happened to be nearest and without waiting for the C.O. to introduce Bullard to him. He was racing against time and formalities had to be dispensed with. In every classroom our guest shook hands with the instructors, whether officers or N.C.O.s, and there was always the same jovial smile on his face. He certainly was doing his best and working hard to make of the visit a success.

The rest of his stay—inspection of the men's dining-room, luncheon in the officers' mess, coffee in the anteroom, a visit to the gymnasium where the Polish airmen were giving an impressive display in gymnastics, and the final departure—all these brought forth the same encouraging words, the same handshake, the same inevitably impersonal but very photogenic smile and an occasional twinkle of the eye.

Though the speed at which the Minister had been forced to race through his programme had robbed it of some of its effectiveness, and the way in which the photographers had monopolized both him and the parade had upset our carefully laid plans, the visit proved a great success, and the C.O. and I who feared that it had been a failure were wrong. The Minister's twinkling eye, handshakes, and smiles turned out to represent the technique that guarantees success. He evidently knew his business far better than we did. The Polish officers were enthusiastic and throughout the station spirits were high. At dinner I happened to be sitting next to Colonel Sok. He was full of admiration for our distinguished guest. 'So natural and charming,' he exclaimed repeatedly, 'not at all like a Cabinet Minister. So easy to get on with. This is real English democracy. Enormous success.'

So, after all, the C.O. and I could congratulate ourselves on having pressed Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw to bring the Secretary of State's visit about.

XIV

DIARY, Sunday

Once again snow is falling and the roads are varnished with ice. Went to H.Q. in the morning to do some work, and at ten-thirty the C.O. came into my room and remained almost till noon, discussing very frankly some of our immediate problems. There is something very endearing about him in those moments of outspokenness, when he appears to be his true self, unaffected by Sleethole's manifold vagaries. From noon till lunch I played badminton, and in the afternoon I had intended to go for a drive; but I discovered that last night some kindly soul had switched on the headlights of my car, and by this morning the battery was run out. It will take more than twenty-four hours before I can use the car again. Only a week ago another kind soul—or was it the same?—threw buckets of wet sand into my car. Since the car is kept in a locked garage to which officers alone have the key, it cannot have been an airman who expressed his sentiments in so quaint a manner.

Returned in the afternoon to H.Q. to do more work, and spent the evening reading T. E. Lawrence's 'Letters'. Read under my present conditions, many of his service letters are full of painfully apposite implications, such as, for example, that for an intellectual suddenly transplanted into an armed service, contentment can be attained only through operational activity or in the ranks. Duty may call you to exchange a life of intellectual pursuits for one that ties you to the customary media of writing-table and typewriter, but gives no scope for intellectual activity, but it can hardly bring contentment. In combat, when the intellectual is transformed into a man of action, he reaches out to the opposite pole of his former being and finds an enrichment of his entire personality.

Before I joined up I imagined that the satisfaction alleged to be derived from association with the ranks was due to some inverted snobbery. Experience has made me change such views. For to-day I know that on the whole the life of the ranker is freer from the false standards and the snobbery which I encounter so frequently in the commissioned caste. I have also found that the more non-operational N.C.O.s are thrown by their work into associating intimately with officers, the more do they seem to indulge in the trivial bickerings which are wont to enliven an officers' mess. It seems to me to be revealing that no N.C.O. manifests a less attractive spirit than those of the Orderly Room, who are in closer touch with officers than those of any other section. I base my observations chiefly on Sleethole, for at Manhill my deductions were rather different. But then operational tasks forge ordinary airmen, N.C.O.s and officers into one brotherhood in which little scope is left for questions of rank or prestige and snobbery. T. E. Lawrence perceived the true constellation in respect to officers and rankers and to operational men very astutely when as an R.A.F. man he wrote in a letter to Air Vice-Marshal Swan, 'The fellows are first class (ninety per cent of them) and a little push will keep them so: the contrast between new and old airmen is astonishing, and it is a little hard for the commissioned to see it,

*because there is a very sharp break in your organization there. It is different, of course, in squadrons: but in these depots you seem to me to run a risk, on that head.*¹

Lawrence's letters thus read during a Sunday when the soporific effects of work have worn off, have reawakened my latent ambition to be sent into action. But I must not be impatient. If I am meant to do actual fighting, fate will intervene. For the moment I must accept this grey office room with its iron stove, its perennial coal dust covering my table, my papers, and chairs, and the view through the window that extends no further than to a corrugated iron roof and the lavatory of combined British and Polish H.Q.

XV

Twenty-four photographers had arrived with the Secretary of State, had upset our time-table, and monopolized the whole show and taken hundreds of photographs, and twenty-four journalists had rushed about with their notebooks, interviewing officers and men and taking copious notes. Naturally, everyone at Sleethole was expecting that the newspapers would be full of articles and photographs of our 'first night'. Yet all that appeared in the entire press were three brief reports and one single photograph, two by one and a half inches large, showing the ubiquitous smile against the background of an unserviceable aeroplane. No doubt many excellent articles had been written and many excellent photographs taken, but for a number of political reasons Government departments prevented the publication of anything but the merest minimum of text and pictures and, in fact, insisted that as little publicity should be given to our show as possible. This was certainly a wise decision. The Foreign Office was rightly anxious lest the Germans should find out too much about Sleethole and either victimize the families of the Poles who were there or exert pressure on the Rumanian Government where several hundred Polish airmen were still waiting to be sent to France and for whose safe arrival our authorities were most anxious. The Germans must have had a good deal of information about the rebirth of the Polish Air Force in Britain—this was inevitable with innumerable German patriots in the guise of innocent refugees walking freely about Britain—and about the aerodrome where the Poles were assembled. But they were not likely to have any 'official' information, and thus could not protest officially to the Rumanian Government. The Foreign Office were fully justified in holding up the news of our venture or at any rate curtailing it. Yet surely the responsible authorities must have known their own minds before mobilizing the gigantic effort on the part of press and photographers.

¹ *Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 378. (Jonathan Cape)

XVI

Though the Minister's visit improved the general spirit of Sleethole, it could of course not solve our difficulties. Among these was the apparent inability of the senior Polish officers to become leaders of their men in something more than mere name. While the authority of Group Captain Milder continued to increase with both Polish officers and men, the Polish command suffered from an inability to establish real discipline among the troops. Their apparent failure to comprehend what was their immediate task at Sleethole contrasted forcibly with the enthusiasm of their men. True, our own officers at Sleethole were not a very inspiring lot, and our own airmen were superior to them in most respects. But whereas most of our officers were middle-aged civilians with little training or knowledge of service matters, the Polish officers were professional fighting men and, in their case, there seemed less justification for the gulf that separated them from their subordinates.

In one respect the Poles were certainly superior to our own men, namely in their physique. Every evening they crowded the gym, fencing, doing Swedish gymnastics, playing basket ball and badminton. Our own P.T. instructors were at first inclined to make supercilious remarks. Soon they had to admit that the general physique of the Poles was superior to that of our own officers and men, who were less muscular, had narrower chests, more drooping shoulders, and thinner limbs. True, within the short space of a few weeks, it was impossible to tell whether the stamina of the Poles was as good as that of their British colleagues, but, from outward appearance, they seemed to be altogether stronger. Full chests, broad shoulders, narrow hips, and straight muscular legs were not exceptional among them as they were among our own troops.

While our own officers and men would arrive in the gym positively overdressed, wearing slacks and high-necked jerseys, the Poles had a passion for wearing as little as possible, and would choose for preference diminutive bathing trunks and nothing else. Their Spartan attire may to some extent have been prompted by an underlying streak of exhibitionism, but in view of their magnificent physique there was some excuse for such a tendency. That physique seemed the more remarkable when considered in relation to the conditions prevailing in the Continental camps in which they had spent their time before coming to Sleethole. According to our own medical board, their health had been harmed in several instances by recent undernourishment. It was surprising therefore that their general physical standard should have remained so little affected, so much less at any rate, than their morale. Such a disparity suggested that their resistance was stronger physically than otherwise, and daily observation seemed to confirm this deduction.

XVII

Even the most cheerful spirit cannot remain unaffected by a persistently low and opaque sky, incessant frost, snow, ice, and blizzards. For the last three days in January we were completely cut off from the rest of mankind. The only road connecting us with the surrounding world was made impassable by four feet of snow, and every time working parties succeeded in clearing a few yards of the surface which extended for the best part of a mile, a fresh blizzard would undo their work. At the best of times Sleethole, devoid of all the lesser amenities that make life more pleasant, suggested a prison. As a young man I once lived in a small oasis in Tunisia; it was cut off by some forty miles of desert from the nearest inhabited place; yet I had never felt half as isolated there as I normally did at Sleethole.

On the third day of our isolation I had a game of badminton with the C.O. After we had finished he remarked, 'I'm feeling better now. When I left H.Q. this evening, I felt positively suicidal.' He was not alone in feeling like that. But the weather and the surroundings were not the only causes of our mental gloom. Some of the daily problems proved even more wearisome. Ordinary difficulties inseparable from any new venture could have easily been surmounted, but we were up against complications arising from unforeseen national differences in outlook. Strangely enough the integrity of the C.O. accentuated these differences.

Possibly as a result of their trying experiences abroad it took Polish H.Q. some time to regain the inner equilibrium that is essential if discussion is to be direct and impersonal in the way best suited to service matters. Many issues appeared to be brought down to the denominator, 'What can I get out of it for myself and for this or that of my friends?' When on one occasion a list of new promotions was transmitted to me by Colonel Sok, I discovered that one of the sergeants, the scion of an aristocratic family, had been listed as an officer. Had this been the first case of some clerical error, the C.O. would have given it the benefit of the doubt, but in the light of similar experiences in the past he suspected deliberate design. 'How do you expect me to retain my enthusiasm and idealism?' he exclaimed when I tried to laugh off the affair of the blue-blooded sergeant's rapid advance.

It was, of course, easier for me to view with indulgence this or similar occurrences, for I was better acquainted than the C.O. with the historical and psychological background that may have been partly responsible for some of our experiences. It is very difficult to suppress personal considerations in a country which for well over a century had been under foreign domination, which was just beginning to find its way back to national order, and which, moreover, was extremely poor. It was Poland's tragedy that when she had thrown off an alien rule and persecution and when her younger generation was growing up in the new spirit of national freedom and dignity, Germany's aggression should suppress it again.

But however keenly one may have been aware of the psychological background of our venture, certain incidents were bound to create an atmosphere which the C.O. had described as suicidal. Though that particular game of badminton had refreshed me, I felt that something more drastic was called for to re-establish my sense of proportion. I refused to continue to view life in no other terms than those of blizzards, snowbound roads, and unorthodox problems emerging from H.Q. across the road. Since I had to make a duty journey to London, I asked the C.O. for an additional twenty-four hours which would enable me to stay away for the week-end.

The prospect of a change had in itself helped to raise my spirits, and even the C.O. was affected by my less gloomy outlook. For some time he had been talking about a possible escape to London, and I felt I had achieved a major victory when I finally succeeded in persuading him to follow my example and to go with his wife to London for the week-end.

XVIII

The very fact of being in London, seeing traffic in the streets, and people unrelated to the problems of Sleethole, had an intensely satisfying effect. I stayed with friends, and seldom had I so much enjoyed the comforts of a well-ordered home. The warm rooms, the comfortable chairs, flowers in vases, lamps which enabled one to read without straining one's eyes! And, above all, the food! It may be that the appreciation of good food is a handicap, for without it I should probably not have noticed the monotony and tastelessness of the Sleethole cuisine. Yet without it I should equally have deprived myself of a great deal during that brief escape from Sleethole. Next to food, the most enjoyable experience in London was that of having a bath, in a warm bathroom, in a clean bath and with sufficient time to lounge, and treat the occasion as one of the few genuine sensuous joys that the technical age has to offer us, not as an unpleasant duty performed in a semi-dark room through whose missing door-panel all the winds of Sleethole congregated, and in water that was rarely more than tepid.

At nine-thirty on Saturday morning I had an appointment with the C.O. and we went together to the Air Ministry. New developments were on foot, and the main purpose of our visit was to find out what the Air Ministry were proposing to do with our guests. Within a few brief weeks Sleethole would be full to capacity and we should have to pass on some of our earliest guests to another place so as to make room for newer arrivals from France. Some of our guests were soon to be ready for flying training. Since Sleethole was a prohibited area for flying, its syllabus did not allow for more than ground training. Questions concerning the central problem of flying training formed the chief topic of our interview at the Ministry.

Though by no means conclusive, the morning at the Air Ministry proved most informative. The authorities seemed to have decided that the

next stage in the Polish training should take place at Nottings in the Midlands. But no-one could give us any information as to the more personal aspects of the forthcoming development. Would the C.O. remain at Sleethole or go with the Poles up north? Though personally I should not have minded escaping from Sleethole, I hated the very idea of separation from the C.O. Besides being my chief, he had become my only friend at Sleethole, and had come to personify for me all that was best both in the Polish show and at our station in general. None of my personal associations at Manhill and Bentley had lasted for very long and the severance of human ties was to me still the one painful element in service life.

What struck me particularly during our visit to the Ministry was the devotion with which the men in the various departments concerned gave themselves to the Polish cause. Often we would receive reports from France showing how little had been done there for the nascent Polish Air Force. Although Britain's ties with Poland had never been half so close as those of France, more unstinted labour or a more whole-hearted enthusiasm could not have been imagined than we encountered in every department of the British Ministry for Air. There was no emotional or sentimental nonsense about the prevailing attitude: the Polish show was a commitment that we had undertaken and the Air Ministry were determined to make a success of it. It might have done Colonel Sok and some of his senior officers good to have been present, for they would have learnt a great deal about British traditions of impersonal service. If they had, we might possibly have been spared some of his dithyrambs to 'our national prestige' and 'my officers' honour'.

Knowing how much more the C.O. and his wife would enjoy a dinner in a private home than in a noisy restaurant, I had asked them to dine with me at my friend's house. The rooms with blazing fires and flowers on tables looked their best, food was excellent and Sleethole seemed incredibly far away.

On Sunday I lunched with the C.O. and his wife at their hotel and during a particularly good meal we even began to discover one or two attractions about Sleethole that seemed to have escaped us before. When viewed from paradise even hell may look attractive. At any rate, London had provided the medicine of which we had all been badly in need.

XIX

The day after my return from London I started my air-gunner's course. Since I did not care to absent myself from H.Q. during office hours, thus adding to the 'liaison officer's unorthodox methods', I arranged to have my morning lesson immediately after breakfast, at 8 a.m., and the second one during lunch-time. My young instructor was that rare mixture, both air-gunner and pilot, and apparently a crack at both jobs. It showed the solicitude of the authorities for the Polish venture that such a man should have been spared for Sleethole.

We began our lessons with the Vickers gun. While I had found flying comparatively easy, the intricacies of a machine-gun—yet the Vickers was supposed to be the simplest of the lot—almost defeated me. Not having gained during my rapid and overcrowded course at Bentley more than a rudimentary knowledge of the gun, I had forgotten in the intervening few months the little I had ever picked up. Shall I ever master the mechanism and learn how to strip and assemble the gun and how to clear stoppages, I wondered? But since the very contact with the machine-gun and its matter-of-fact efficiency only increased my desire to escape from my existing surroundings and the sedentary life that I was leading, I was determined to make good by hard work the natural deficiencies of my non-mechanical mind.

XX

One day early in February, the Director of Training at the Air Ministry arrived to discuss the forthcoming flying training of the Poles. According to our visitor, each Polish detachment that had finished its course at Sleethole was to be dispatched to Notting's for a six weeks' operational course before being attached to British squadrons. Thus while Sleethole would begin to decrease, Notting's was to grow in proportion from week to week. At Sleethole the Poles were under the jurisdiction of Training Command; once they were moved north, they would become part of Bomber Command. What were the implications of these moves in so far as we were concerned? Was the C.O. to remain to command the diminishing contingent? Would the Polish squadrons be completely removed from his supervision later on? It was doubtful whether the authorities fully realized the intricacies of the Polish 'problem' with its many psychological implications. In the last few months the C.O. had asked me to prepare a number of memoranda dealing in some detail with this subject; they were duly dispatched to those concerned, but we suspected that they never emerged from the files in which they presumably had found a permanent resting-place. By the authority that he had gained among the Poles and by his sympathetic understanding of their mentality, the C.O. seemed the only senior officer on our side who knew how to handle our guests and their problems. Would the authorities realize this and see that his command over them should be continued? The ideal solution seemed to be to invest him with some sort of roving commission that would keep him in charge of the Poles wherever they might be. My work being intimately related to his personality, my own future, too, depended upon the C.O.'s forthcoming moves. Yet something told me that whatever shape those moves might assume, fate would decide in a way totally different from anything I had anticipated.

Three days after the visit of the Director of Training, we were informed that the Poles' preliminary flying training would take place not in the Midlands, but at an aerodrome in the south, and the C.O. immedi-

ately dispatched me to Ledley to inspect the place, establish contact with its C.O. and make a report. I started at seven in the morning and after a pleasant drive reached Ledley, a former civilian aerodrome that had been taken over by the R.A.F. The place was situated in charming surroundings. Snowdrops were still on the ground and a few cowslips were pushing their way through the moss and last year's dead leaves. Ledley's C.O. was a delightful man; the former clubhouse, transformed into the officers' mess, provided an excellent luncheon; the bedrooms were equipped with running water and gay modern furniture; everyone was courteous, and, altogether, no more pleasant holiday spot could have been imagined. I envied the Poles who were to be sent there for a few weeks' flying training and, after I had reported to the C.O. he, evidently affected by my own enthusiasm, remarked, 'Lucky devils, aren't they. I think I'm going to apply for a flying refresher course at Ledley. You'll have to look after this place while I'm away', he added jestingly and I replied, but not altogether in jest, 'I'd much rather go to Ledley with you, sir; if needs be, as your batman'.

XXI

A strange thing occurred the night after my return from Ledley. Two of our service policemen were walking round the camp, when near one of the airmen's huts they discovered some smouldering rags. They crouched on the ground to extinguish the fire when suddenly the beam of a torch was shone into their faces and they found themselves confronted by a man with a revolver. They jumped aside, got hold of the man, and found that he was one of those Polish officers who had arrived at Sleethole only quite recently and were still wearing civilian clothes. When questioned, the officer explained that in the dark he had believed the policemen were saboteurs trying to set the hut on fire. The next day the C.O. interviewed Colonel Sok and only with difficulty was he able to make him acknowledge that the carrying of loaded revolvers by officers—'for the protection of their honour'—was not to be encouraged in an English aerodrome.

After the Colonel's departure the C.O. turned to me and there was greater sadness in his expression than I had ever seen before. 'Really,' he said in a resigned voice, 'the senior Polish officers are doing all they can to stifle one's enthusiasm for their cause. Every day anew I paraphrase to myself these words I once read, "Christianity is great in spite of the Christians" by saying, "Poland is great in spite of some Polish officers"'. It would be impossible to carry on this work if one did not believe that the spirit of Poland is unconquerable and that Poland represents something great and worth suffering for. Thank God an idea can be greater than its representatives.'

Never before had I heard the essentially simple and matter-of-fact Group Captain Milder reach out to such philosophical heights. But then it was evident that this incident with its surprising implications had shaken

him more than any of the other numerous surprises of the last few months.

XXII

DIARY

Am just about beginning to master the Vickers gun. The feed-piece and trigger-connecting rod, the ejector and flash eliminator are no longer mysteries to me, and this morning I stripped and reassembled the gun within two minutes, which my instructor considers satisfactory. There is something very gratifying in mastering an intricate instrument like a machine-gun, and this compensates for some of Sleethole's innumerable disadvantages. The fiercer the daily conflicts and the less congenial the atmosphere of the mess, the more I look forward to my lessons, and the greater the satisfaction I derive from my hour's preoccupation with the gun. There is no deliberate malice about it and, however much it may in the future misbehave itself, no tricks on its part will result from petty jealousy. Whether my growing liking of machinery is directly related to some of the features of my fellow humans here, I do not know. But whatever the reasons, few things during the last few months have given me greater peace than my new knowledge of the gun.

XXIII

To augment our badly overworked staff in the training centre a new officer arrived one day in February. It soon leaked out, however, that he was an expert on . . . theatricals and little else, and since the C.O. had not applied for an entertainment officer no-one quite knew what to do with him. For several days all efforts to employ him within our existing machinery failed. He arrived at Sleethole in a greatcoat adorned by a fur collar; he wore a heavy gold wristlet and had an elegant Guardsman's moustache painted, yes, painted, coal black. He was very tall, very thin, and very red-faced, and all day long he would make puns and crack jokes, but when for a whole week no employment could be found for him, his beaming face became more and more gloomy, and, finally, having been told that I was the C.O.'s Personal Assistant, he called on me evidently to unburden himself and to ensure my support with the C.O.

He offered me a cigarette from a very large gold cigarette case with his initials studded in small rubies, and before he had had time to sit down, he began, 'I'm full of ideas, I can do anything. All I want is the C.O.'s authority and it's for you, old man, to get it for me. I've just prepared a sort of scenario for him and have asked for an interview for this afternoon. I've been sitting in this bloomin' hole for a week and nothing happens, nothing; no-one seems to be doing anything here. You people walk about like corpses. What you want is life, life with a capital L. I'll swing you a band as you've never heard one before. All I need is the old man's authority,' he repeated. 'I'm sick of waiting. I'll tell the old man—what sort of a bloke is he really, does he know anything about life?—well, I'll

soon find out, I know a thing or two about human nature—I'll tell him, respectfully, of course, and tactfully (I know how to treat people) that to make this bloomin' Polish show a success he needs a man like me. Why, no-one in the Raff has ever heard anything about the Poles! Well, I'll put life into this show, you wait; once I get the C.O.'s authority I'll start with a bang, with a bang, old man.'

'What do you propose to do?' I interrupted when he stopped to take breath.

'What I propose to do? Good heavens, old man, that's as clear as daylight: put you on the map, on the map, old man, with a capital M, as I did at Bournemouth. I put Bournemouth on the map, yessir. What, you haven't heard what I did for Bournemouth? God have mercy on you; how long have you been in the Raff? Since the beginning of the war? And you haven't heard what I did for the Raff at Bournemouth? Good God, you too are dead, utterly dead, with a capital D, old man. What we want at this rotten place is a band, two bands, one for marches, one for the officers' mess and theatricals. Next thing we want is a first-rate theatrical ensemble. You leave it to me, I can make any airman into an Evelyn Laye or an Ivor Novello. We'll have one performance a week; not more, otherwise you cheapen yourself, and once a week a concert, yes, that's enough; and then one evening a boxing match—I'll get you the stars from London, they're all pals of mine. For the other nights I'll think out something else. You just leave it to me; no-one has ever accused me of not having ideas. Ideas, old man, with a capital I. Do you know what I did for Bournemouth? Old man, you know nothing of art if you haven't seen my production at Bournemouth. I'll tell you. Now imagine where this blank wall is, there is the stage. First darkness, black, suspense. Then a few lights, just a few. And what do you think you see? Rows and rows of sandbags on the stage, yessir, trenches. You get me? Then suddenly lights at the back of the stage, brilliant lights, proper searchlights. What do you see? Union Jacks, a sea of Union Jacks, a sea, I tell you. Then lights all over the stage, and what does the audience behold? Behind the sacks I had placed machine-guns, not dummies made of wood, nosir, not me. The armourer boys had let me have a dozen machine-guns; I wanted fifty, but the beggars couldn't spare so many, so just a dozen. The guns were directed at the audience, straight at the audience. You get me? From the ceiling above the stage four propellers were suspended. Cardboard? No sir, real whoppers, taken from aircraft. When the audience had just got over the first effect, we switched on the propellers and they turned like hell, whizzing and blasting the front rows out of their bloomin' seats. That's effect, yessir. This went on for a few seconds, then the band struck up God Save the King and the Union Jacks at the back began fluttering—my own secret how we did it. Before God Save the King finished, all the twelve machine-guns started to fire straight at the audience. Everyone was dumb, flabbergasted, choking. Man, you should have seen it. You wouldn't forget it as long as you live. Even in the West End they'd never seen anything like it. You take it from me, never.'

The C.O.'s bell rang for me. 'Tell the C.O.,' my guest got up, 'what I want is authority, and then I'll do here exactly what I did at Bournemouth: put you on the map. The whole Raff will talk about you. All I want is to put you on the map. So long.'

XXIV

Towards the end of the month, General Zet, the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Air Force, arrived from France and came to pay us an official visit. The excuse for his visit was the first hoisting of the new Polish ensign, and there was the whole rigmarole of parading, marching by, inspection, photographers, official luncheon, a concert in the afternoon provided by Polish airmen, and Dinner Night in the mess. Once again Dinner Night—with the top table decorated in the Polish colours, white and red, grace in Latin both before and after the meal, and the toast of the King and the Polish President—proved quite an impressive affair. Its dignity and ceremonial were obviously much appreciated by our new guests. For the first time there were speeches at dinner: by the C.O., by the General, and finally by Colonel Sok. Our own officers were on their very best behaviour, and, for once, the mess showed some of that dignified traditionalism and well-tempered joviality that should be the birthright of an officers' mess. Dinner was followed by the customary game of snooker between the four senior officers; but for the first time there was a band, brought into existence by our enterprising 'Bournemouth' officer. It didn't take long before the band began to give the anteroom the aspect of a night club with almost everyone singing and shouting. The 'Bournemouth' officer, his face the colour of a peony and the paint off his moustache trickling down his chin in rivulets of grey matter, was standing on the top of the piano, beating time with a sherry bottle.

By ten o'clock most of the senior officers, both Polish and British, were chaired and then thrown into the air, losing in that process either their spectacles or their small change, or a suspender, or even suffering such minor injuries as a bruised hand, leg, or some other portion of their anatomy.

Once again it struck me how much better the Poles behaved themselves than their British colleagues. Whereas they all kept sober, half a dozen of our own officers were blind drunk. Once alcohol had washed away the dams that convention or repression had built up, they let themselves go with an abandon that made the Poles watch them with astonishment. After expressing their *joie de vivre* first by merely shouting and dancing, both solo and in couples, some of our officers began to fight. They called it all-in wrestling, which it undoubtedly was. When at eleven the C.O. and the senior Polish officers departed, a rugger match was staged in which a waste-paper basket had to serve as the ball. Within a quarter of an hour there was more blood about than during a real rugger match, and torn ties, tunics, and trousers demonstrated the aggressive spirit of both teams.

I left at midnight. My last impression was that of one of the officers,

no longer able to stand upright, sprawling full length across the piano, roaring as loud as he could and creating weird noises by striking the metal strings with a shoe which one of the rugger players must have lost during the combat. When I reached my room to take my dogs for their evening walk, they sat huddled together in a corner greeting me with frightened eyes. It was no good my telling them that the inferno on the ground floor meant nothing worse than that Sleethole was put on the map.

XXV

When in the course of his visit General Zet mentioned that he and his party were going to Nottings, one of the future homes of the Poles, the C.O. suggested to the General that I should join him in order to make a report on that aerodrome. So two days after our big party, I spent the night in London, and early on the following morning called on the General. He was in the company of his two staff officers and a liaison officer from the Air Ministry who was in charge of all the arrangements for our journey.

General Zet, whilst typically soldierly in bearing, was at the same time surprisingly shy. His simplicity and his appearance—clean-shaven head, high cheekbones, and narrow eyes—suggested a Russian soldier, not quite at ease among men not of his own class, rather than a general belonging to a nation renowned for the ease of its manners. His sincerity and modesty contrasted favourably with the more florid gifts of some of the officers with whom we had had dealings at Sleethole.

At our destination we were met by two senior officers with two staff cars who took us through many miles of unattractive industrial landscape. We arrived at the aerodrome just before lunch, and were received on the doorstep of the mess by the Commanding Officer and some of his staff. In the anteroom a large tray with glasses of vodka was ready, and it is still beyond me how they managed to procure the stuff at such short notice, for they had known nothing at all about the Polish venture and had been informed of our visit only the night before. In the dining-room a special table, decorated with red and white silk ribbons, awaited us, and we sat down to an excellent luncheon of six courses. The efficiency and forethought with which Nottings rose to the occasion were indeed impressive. Though none of the local people had heard anything about the prospective handing over of their station to the Poles, they showed all that natural helpfulness that I so well remembered from Manhill and that once again made me proud to belong to the R.A.F.

Lunch was followed by the usual inspection of the station, a rather old-fashioned one, with a small aerodrome and primitive living quarters in wooden huts. While the General continued to inspect the place, I withdrew with the senior administrative officer to collect the data for my report and to ascertain such prosaic details as the number of available beds, aircraft, equipment, and so on. This job finished, I took leave of the General and his party and before four o'clock started on my return

journey. At Birmingham I missed my connection by exactly thirty seconds and when I reached London it was almost midnight. Throughout the best part of the night I was busy preparing my report, for on the following morning the C.O. was coming to London for conferences at the Air Ministry and he wanted me to have it ready.

I met the C.O. at nine, and we spent both morning and afternoon at the Air Ministry.

For some weeks past I had been urging the C.O. to visit the Air Ministry more frequently and to do some personal prodding. The numerous letters and memoranda which he had sent to London might have been as many pebbles thrown into the sea, and except for occasional rumours, we had no information as to Nottings or any other scheme in preparation for the Polish venture. The C.O.'s essentially reticent nature made him averse to pushing himself forward or trying to force decisions. Whenever I pressed him particularly hard he accused me of 'impatience and unorthodoxy'. 'In the R.A.F. things can't be hurried,' he would explain, 'they must take their own time. Don't forget you're dealing with a Government department.' Yet I knew that at heart he was far more impatient than I, and really welcomed my prodding, for it not only spurred him on, but put part of the responsibility, if only in a purely psychological sense, upon my shoulders. As I was of very junior rank and, moreover, not a professional officer, I could afford not to mind however much my 'unorthodoxy' might make me unpopular with my betters. The C.O.'s position, needless to say, was fundamentally different; so I was delighted to provide him with a 'psychological scapegoat'.

Though Sleethole would soon be crowded and unable to absorb fresh arrivals, both the Polish and French Governments were pressing that we should accept more Polish airmen than had been stipulated for in the original agreement between the governments concerned. The Air Ministry, who were concentrating on the prosecution of a major war, could hardly be expected to give up to foreigners yet another of the few and badly needed training stations. But since it was for us to look after those foreigners, we could hardly help viewing the problem from the perspective of our own requirements.

The morning's visit confirmed our fears that nothing decisive had been done, but I had always been convinced that if we secured the sympathetic interest of someone high up at the Ministry, we might yet speed up the settlement of the various existing schemes. After several interviews on what the C.O. called the lower plane, we were finally admitted to the presence of an Air Marshal, competent to deal with our particular problem. He looked tired and overworked and the problem of the Polish air units must have seemed very trivial to him. The establishment of new aerodromes in France was supposed to be his particular worry of the moment. Yet our visit was not altogether fruitless. The C.O. succeeded in rousing the great man's interest, and before we left him he rang up Bomber Command to plead our cause.

Our experience with the Air Marshal was repeated during subsequent interviews in other departments. There again, men whom from our seclusion at Sleethole we had been wont to suspect of being the chief obstacles to our progress, took a personal interest in our show and instantly became active on our behalf. I realized that even in an armed service a great deal could be achieved if you were prepared to take the initiative. What was needed was, first of all, to contemplate the particular problem in all its aspects, and then to present those in authority with a definite plan. It would be foolish to expect anyone else to think out your specific problems for you. The man on top is too much burdened with a thousand different problems to master any one of them. All he can do is to decide whether the plan placed before him can be co-ordinated with other plans. But the plan must be yours. You will fail, of course, if you make a nuisance of yourself, and the dividing line between taking initiative and becoming a nuisance is very faint and often indiscernible. Your chief difficulty is to realize when you overstep that fateful line.

After we had concluded our interviews at the Air Ministry and retired to the R.A.F. Club for a cup of tea, the C.O. admitted that, after all, it might perhaps be advisable to visit London more frequently.

XXVI

The few stimulating days at Nottings and London were followed by a weary chain of difficulties and worries at Sleethole. After a few days I felt on edge again and at night found it difficult to sleep. It seemed as though Sleethole had the power to evoke what was worst in everyone, myself included. On all too frequent an occasion I would catch myself copying the prevalent fashion of discussing the shortcomings of others at great length. The inmates of Sleethole seemed indeed to delight in discovering one another's faults and exaggerating these out of all proportion. Whenever an officer called on the C.O., you could be sure that the main, though not necessarily official, purpose of his visit was to report the latest misdeed on the part of one of his colleagues, and whenever the C.O. asked me to check up on such reports, we invariably discovered that the facts showed only the faintest resemblance to them. It was depressing to live in an atmosphere of such constant criticism and exaggeration. You fell an easy victim to it and in turn added your own share to it. It would have needed someone of exceptional strength of mind and courage to stand out against it.

At one time or another most of us must have learned that the only atmosphere in which communal existence can be bearable is one in which we try to minimize the shortcomings of our fellows and think and act on the assumption that they are not quite so bad as they seem.

DIARY

The influence of Sleethole does more than rob me of my peace of mind. Before I came here, I knew that there was no situation in life that could not

be met, and often even solved, by prayer. Prayer gave strength to meet difficulties, and stimulated everything that was best in me. Here I find myself incapable of praying, and am thus deprived of the chief weapon with which to meet the unfavourable conditions. I am either too tired to pray, and fall asleep at night before I have had time to do so, or I forget all about it. But I believe there is something more fundamental in my inability to pray than these external circumstances. It is what I continue to regard as the inherent spirit of the place, but it is also some personal demoralization which I am dimly aware of yet unable or unwilling to check. Not having realized the true situation at the outset, I've allowed myself to sink deeper and deeper into the quagmire of spiritual sloth and have enabled a very undesirable influence to get the better of me.

At the same time I am getting sick of myself and my discontent. I know as I have always known, even though I was too young to take part in the last war, that, for all its obvious beastliness, a war can evoke the noblest in people and that to-day thousands of men throughout Britain are giving all that is best in them. It is of them, their comradeships, their loyalties, and sacrifices that I should be writing. Yet can a confession be a true one—and what else are these pages but a confession?—unless it deals with the things that touch the confessor most intimately? The very fact that I have become more critical of my fellow men than I ever had been before in the forty years of my life, seems to indicate that the influence of Sleethole is not a mere fiction on my part. Of Sleethole alone? . . . I do not dare to face this question and I fear its implications. For I feel that the fault lies not only with Sleethole.

XXVII

Notwithstanding the C.O.'s emphatic assurances that I possessed his full confidence, I felt for some time that this was not so. However delighted he was with our visit to the Air Ministry, thanking me for my share in it, the moment we were back at Sleethole things seemed to change and on several occasions I was aware of a new wave of mistrust on his part. When before an important conversation with Colonel Sok the latter asked the C.O. that I should not be present, he consented without protest, yet, as though troubled by his conscience, he later on confessed what he had done. Almost from the very beginning it had been agreed that since my duties were not of an executive nature but concerned solely with planning and policy, I should keep myself informed of every detail affecting such planning. Only thus could the C.O. depend on at least one person who was in possession of all the relevant facts. But now his attitude threatened to knock out the very basis upon which my work rested, and I decided to have an interview with him.

All the time I was stating my case the C.O. looked very uncomfortable, but after I had finished he turned the tables on me and set out to explain the difficulties that my presence had created for him. In the service people

with 'prominence in civilian life', as he was pleased to call it, always evoked the jealousy and animosity of their colleagues. In the end it was their commanding officer who had to suffer from the results. He had deliberately put the brake on our relationship because whispers had reached him to the effect that he was unable to take any decision without consulting the liaison officer. He assured me, however, that in spite of everything, his confidence remained unchanged; but I must not forget that I was still regarded as an intruder brought to Sleethole over the heads of everyone else.

There seemed little point in my repeating that it wasn't my fault that he had not been informed of the fact that I was the only person specially trained at the time for the sake of the Polish venture. It wasn't I who had imposed myself upon Sleethole. And so long as I was permitted to continue my job, I regarded it as my right to help to make our show a success.

Unfortunately I didn't say any of these things, though afterwards I wished I had. Even if it had appeared tactless, it would probably have been better for everyone concerned, for the air would have been cleared. As it was, though we parted friends, I did not feel that the recent strain in our relationship had really been eased. I deplored this the more because of my devotion to the C.O. Among the mistakes that I had committed at Sleethole, one of the worst was that I had never disguised that devotion to him. After several months he naturally began to take everything related to my work for granted. Whilst, during my early weeks at the station he would often say jokingly that nothing I did could go wrong, of late he had gone out of his way to point out to me anything he didn't approve of, while treating me to lengthy accounts of the meritorious performances of other people. I fully appreciated the psychological significance of his attitude and his need for some sort of scapegoat. After all, hadn't he for some time called me his 'conscience', and is not conscience in this connection first cousin to a scapegoat? But because of my attachment to him I was anxious that our relationship should remain harmonious, and it was for that very reason that I did not find it easy to stifle the increasing sense of frustration.

Fortunately there remained one sphere that was unaffected by any of the countless outer and inner conflicts. It was that of my air-gunnery course to which were added lessons on navigation and bombing. My air-gunnery work gave me a sense of calm unequalled by anything else at Sleethole, and I regarded my two sergeant instructors as friends and knew that they enjoyed the lessons almost as much as I did. Being operational men, they were more or less impervious to the spirit of Sleethole and showed much of that straightforwardness and matter-of-fact simplicity that I knew so well from Manhill. If the break was to come, as one day it might, I wanted to be ready to volunteer as an air-gunner. I knew that my path would be anything but easy, the main difficulty being my eyes. I had undergone a special examination by our local medical board, and though my general condition was A1, I was found 'unfit for air crew'.

Yet with spectacles my vision was far above the average, and without them only a little below the requisite standard. Unfortunately the existing regulations prohibited people in need of spectacles from acting in an air crew. I was determined to get round that difficulty, even if I had to pull every string that I could lay hands on.

XXVIII

Three days after our interview the C.O. spent a day in London, and on his return, told me that Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw wanted me to go over to Paris to clear up certain matters with the French authorities and the Polish High Command. Was I willing to go? Of course I was delighted, and not even so much on account of the job itself and of the welcome change, as because the C.O.'s request appeared to imply that the recent assurance of his confidence was genuine. 'You had better get on to XQ Department at the Air Ministry at once, so that they can arrange for your seat on the Paris plane, your passport, and everything else. You'll probably have to leave the day after to-morrow, so keep yourself ready.'

I thanked the C.O., and experienced throughout the rest of the day the excitement that in pre-war days used to precede my holidays abroad. I deliberately spent the evening with those Polish officers who had only recently returned from France and were thus fully acquainted with the situation there. On several previous occasions I found that such friendly conversations revealed much more information of importance than did the official reports which we were in the habit of receiving from our own liaison officers in France. As it happened, I gathered more information of such a nature than I had anticipated, and on the following morning reported it to the C.O. He was very pleased with it, and without loss of time rang up the Air Ministry to pass it on to those concerned.

When I returned to his room an hour later, he turned to me and remarked with exaggerated affability, 'Air Ministry were delighted with your information and congratulate you on having collected it. They are sending Squadron Leader A. to-morrow to Paris to make immediate use of it.'

For a moment I could hardly believe my ears. At last I mumbled, 'But following your instructions, sir, I've already been in touch with XQ, and arranged for my passage for to-morrow.'

'That doesn't matter, they can easily transfer your seat to Squadron Leader A., in fact I've already told them to do so.'

From the way he avoided my eyes, something he very seldom did, I gathered that in the meantime some outside influence had been brought to bear on him, and in his usual soft-heartedness he had agreed at the last moment to entrust the Paris mission to someone else. There was nothing for me to say, so I merely saluted and left the room. Fool that I had been, to imagine that Sleethole would ever permit of a straightforward human relationship!

When I got back to my room I remembered that something similar had

happened only a few days previously though at the time I had not paid much attention to the incident. After my visit to Ledley, the C.O. had suggested that I should accompany the first party of sixteen Polish officers on their new course there and remain with them for a couple of days to act as their liaison officer with the local authorities. The C.O. knew how tired I was of Sleethole and how keenly I had been looking forward to those few days' change. But when shortly afterwards one of our new instructors mentioned to him that he was getting bored with Sleethole and would like to spend a couple of weeks at Ledley, the C.O. consented to send him there instead of me. When later on he had to tell me of his decision, he tried to sugar the pill by explaining that I was 'far more useful at Sleethole, liaison at Ledley being far below' my standard. 'We need someone with your brains at Sleethole.'

It was only his inherent kindness that prevented Group Captain Milder from saying no to any request for a favour, but the resulting instability robbed me of the chief plank of support for my work. Though I knew that nothing at Sleethole could be solved satisfactorily for any length of time, I decided to have one last talk with the C.O. If I failed again, I should have to think along new lines, but for the time being I hated the idea that our collaboration should disintegrate in the way most things did at that place.

I called at the C.O.'s private house on the following day, which was a Sunday. It was the first fine day of the winter. The sun was shining in an immaculate sky and it might almost have been May. The C.O. was sitting in the glass veranda which was filled with sparkling light. He was holding in one hand his cup of after-lunch coffee and in the other a pencil with which he was working on a crossword puzzle. There was something touching about the homely scene, and I felt a cad to be intruding upon his rare moments of peace and privacy. This feeling only increased during our subsequent conversation, for after I had finished my tale, he gave me a pathetic and helpless look and said in a voice in which there was undisguised disillusionment, 'What do you want me to do? I thought *you* would appreciate the intimacy of our collaboration, and now you come and complain. By God, what an awful place this is. It seems to have demoralized everyone. I always thought you were the one person I could rely on, no matter what happened, and now even you come and accuse me. What have I done?'

His words made me feel a complete blackguard, but once having started, I couldn't possibly draw back. So without looking at him I spoke of his recent decisions in regard to Ledley and Paris and also of his latest move in regard to Morley. Morley was yet another Air Force station in which some of our guests were shortly to be accommodated. At the time when the scheme had originally been discussed, the C.O. had said that Morley would be a particularly difficult venture and that he would like someone he could trust to be in charge of it during the first few days. He asked me whether I would like to undertake this, and I naturally accepted. A few days later he mentioned casually that he thought of sending someone else

to Morley, in fact—our entertainments officer. Paris and Ledley were a *fait accompli*, and his excuses in regard to these two subjects must have sounded unconvincing even to himself. Morley was obviously even more difficult to explain away, and in the end he said, 'Go to Morley by all means; I haven't made up my mind yet. But I consider that Morley would be a step back for you. You can do far more important work here and I need you at Sleethole.'

What could I say in return? I was just as delighted to collaborate with him in matters of higher policy as to act as his office boy. I knew that every word he said came from the heart. Yet experience had taught me that either the peculiar character of Sleethole, outside influences, or possibly some weakness within myself, would prevent him from putting his assurance into effect.

XXIX

The comparative lull of the preceding week was followed by several exceptionally crowded days. Besides the routine work, there were such additional jobs as arranging at a moment's notice the first visit of the senior Polish officers to operational stations; flying visits to Ledley and London and preparations for Morley. The C.O. suddenly changed his mind and decided that it might be unwise to establish the first Polish detachment outside Sleethole without the supervision of a British officer who was not a complete ignoramus of the problems involved. He asked me to undertake the job and to act as their temporary commanding officer. Since the Air Ministry had promised to dispatch a permanent C.O. without delay, my stay at Morley should not last longer than a couple of days. Thus I was going to leave for my first, and presumably only, trial as a C.O.

I had inquired at Morley whether I should be permitted to bring my dogs with me and was given permission to do so, but when early on the morning of my departure I let them out for their usual run, Billfox shot away across the aerodrome towards a distant farm, and no more was seen of him. Presumably a "lady" of some attraction was domiciled at the farm, for as a rule he was most obedient and would not run away. Since, however, he had made friends with most of our service police, I was certain that he would either be brought back by one of them or return to my room on his own. But I had to depart without him.

The countryside was bathed in gold, and fields and meadows were looking their best. I had left early so as to reach Morley before the arrival of the Polish troops travelling by train. Since, in accordance with an additional agreement between the governments concerned, a further thousand Polish airmen were to be trained in this country, new quarters had to be found. Morley then was to provide the preliminary elementary training before the new arrivals could be sent on to Sleethole for their regular courses. The Polish troops were headed by Squadron Leader F.,

their own commanding officer, but the general arrangements and supervision were in the hands of the British C.O., that is to say, for the moment, in mine.

Morley was one of the largest R.A.F. stations in the country. We were treated there merely as lodgers for whom food and accommodations had to be provided. It was for us to look after the discipline of the Poles and to provide occupation for them. Since special instructors or equipment were lacking, we had to occupy them with drill, physical training, games, and English lessons. In consequence I found myself faced with a job which on the whole was not so much air force in character as military and disciplinary.

I got to Morley just in time for lunch, and after a hurried meal had talks with the local commanding officer and two members of his administrative staff. Soon afterwards the Poles arrived and I rushed to be present as they took over their new quarters. Tea, too, was a hurried meal, for I had called a conference for four-thirty with my new collaborators, the Polish C.O., the new British adjutant attached to the Polish unit at Morley, and a British squadron leader who would be the Poles' senior educational officer. Our job was to lay down some sort of a scheme for the training of our men and to evolve a time-table for the first and difficult few days. It was more or less a question of improvising out of the blue. For me personally the net result was that during my brief stay at Morley I was to give two English lessons per day.

After the nerve-wrecking uncertainties of Sleethole, to be active and have a definite job was in itself a wonderful relief. But much as I enjoyed the work, I delighted even more in the mere fact of being there. Morley was a large recruiting centre for the R.A.F. and housed several thousand new recruits. Moreover, it contained a number of operational squadrons. The aerodrome vibrated with the hum and noise of aircraft taking off and landing, and the mess was full of those keen, and inspiring young men, with whose kind I had shared my life at Manhill. The arrangements in the dining-room were impressive, a lavish cold buffet, flowers on each table, and waiters wearing white and blue liveries with silver buttons. The general atmosphere of the mess was both civilized and friendly. Instead of being regarded as an intruder, as I justifiably might have been, I was received with that natural hospitality that seemed a mark of every operational station. In fact, at every step I came across reminiscences of or analogies with Manhill. When the day's work was done, I gave myself up for the evening to the pleasure of the mess and felt happier than I had done for months.

Most of the officers in the mess were flying men, pilots and a sprinkling of air-gunners, but whether they were of the very young and rather shy type or hearty and noisy, they all seemed devoted to their job and completely removed from the world of service bickerings. It might be that

these played a part even in their lives, but, unlike the general rule at Sleethole, no-one talked about them. In the anteroom you did not come across little groups whispering like conspirators and casting inimical glances in the direction of other equally glum-looking groups; and the whole spirit of the mess had the straightforwardness which after Sleethole seemed as refreshing and surprising as a feature of some other planet.

At dinner I sat next to a Hurricane pilot, a fair-haired lad of twenty with the physique of a boxer and the face of a schoolboy. During the few minutes between the *hors d'œuvre* and the soup he told me the 'story of his life', but just after he had started his soup—of which he had demanded 'a double portion, and more of it'—the waiter came up to him and announced, 'You're wanted on the 'phone, sir'. My neighbour returned after less than a minute. 'To hell,' he muttered, 'the third night without dinner.' He gulped down two spoonfuls of soup, squeezed some biscuits and an apple into his pocket and got up. 'Those Jerry bastards always come along when I start dinner. I've to be up within five minutes, blast the Hun', but he was beaming all over his face and evidently did not much mind the interruption of his meal. 'Keep some cheese and biscuits for me', he cried to the waiter as he rushed out of the room.

After talking shop for a few minutes with the Polish Squadron Leader F., I spent the rest of the evening in the anteroom, and started by having a chat with a young Australian pilot who was smoking a large cigar. There was a piano in the anteroom, and soon after the nine o'clock news a young flight lieutenant sat down at it. What a pity, I thought to myself, the spell of Morley will be broken and for the rest of the evening we shall be regaled with inferior jazz. And all conversation will have to come to an end. Indeed all conversation did come to an end, but the spell of that happy day was not to be broken. The young man at the piano began with César Franck and then he continued to play French music for almost an hour, without stopping between one piece and another and often linking them with improvisations quite remarkably in the spirit of the work he had just concluded. He took no notice of anyone present and seemed to be playing exclusively for his own enjoyment. Though, or perhaps because, his technique was far above the average and his style intensely personal, even when he played compositions well known to me they sounded like improvisations. His colleagues appeared to be used to his music; they went on reading their papers and books, but no-one spoke and if, occasionally, a few words had to be exchanged, it was only in a whisper. The pianist ended as unexpectedly as he had begun. He got up from the piano, picked up the latest number of the *Aeroplane*, and settled down in an easy chair. He could not know that for one person at least he had crowned a happy day with contentment that was so intense as to be felt almost physically. The buzz of conversation broke out again and, as if by magic, the waiters appeared to take orders for drinks. Only then did I notice that for the best part of an hour no-one had ordered a drink and no waiter had entered the room.

On many a recent occasion I had been complaining to myself that a

diarist's job was so much more difficult than that of a novelist who didn't need to concern himself overmuch with facts in all their possibly dreary complications. Moreover, was he not free to lead an incident to any climax that appeared most effective to him? On my first evening at Morley I learned that the diarist could beat the fiction writer at his own job. For what novelist would have dared to allow an exceptional day to culminate in the perfect ending of that unforeseen concert? In a novel such an ending would sound untrue and artificial. As a mere diarist I could afford to record even this 'artificial' finale to a perfect day. Perhaps it was some kindly fairy who had ordained it? In my mood of the moment I was prepared to believe anything.

Before I got up to retire to bed my friend from dinner came into the anteroom. He looked flushed but was still beaming all over his face. 'I couldn't get a Hun,' he exclaimed, 'but I got my cheese and even two ham sandwiches.' I congratulated him on this success and then left the anteroom. But an unbelievably well-disposed fate had evidently not yet exhausted her repertoire of surprises for the dreamlike evening. When I got into my room a lump of brown and white fluff jumped up at me barking excitedly. How the dickens had Billfox got to my room? He couldn't possibly have followed me for over fifty miles of unknown country. Nothing quite so romantic had happened. For on the table there was a scribbled note, and I recognized the handwriting of my batman at Sleethole. 'The C.O. sent me to bring your dog.'

The last two days at Morley were as busy as the first and as full of enjoyment. Besides the hundred different 'routine' things—such as, for example, discovering that while the Polish troops had nothing against their huts being exceedingly cold they all complained about their insufficient ration of bread, or arranging that the local authorities should lift the ban imposed for 'security' reasons upon conversation between Poles and Englishmen—there were my two daily English lessons which the unfortunate men had to attend in full strength. To make things a little easier for them I had concocted a scheme of coloured chalks according to which I wrote out the various words on the blackboard in different colours. Thus, nouns were red, verbs blue, adjectives green, and so forth. We all enjoyed the joke and, once again, I was impressed by the burning zest of the Polish ranks for new knowledge. They devoted themselves to their English lessons with an abandon that was almost sensuous. Yet no language could have been more difficult for them than English. Its comparative lack of hard-and-fast rules, its illogical pronunciation and countless self-contradictions were something quite new to them, and the phonetics of the 'th', the 'a' in hat, 'u' in cup, the second vowel sound in 'enough', confronted them with infinitely more intricate problems than did the Hispano-Suiza cannon or the latest gyroscopic bombsight. Most of them were the sons of peasants, artisans, labourers, and had no knowledge of a foreign language. The little some of them knew of Russian, German, or French was of no assistance to them in their approach to the mysterious

new idiom whose every law must seem to baffle all their former conceptions of how to tackle a new language. Seldom had I seen a crowd whose faces displayed a concentration so intense, almost to the point of being painful. Yet they seemed to enjoy the task for towards the end of each lesson there was much laughter and joking, and they walked back to their quarters conversing with one another in 'English' and evoking the amused astonishment of all passers-by.

I was sorry when the lessons came to an end. I was even more sorry that the days at Morley should have come to an end. They were the finest holiday I had had since peace-time. Though my free moments there were limited I made in those three days more friends than I did at Sleethole in as many months. I even induced Rockie to exchange an occasional word with me. He was the mascot of a Hurricane squadron, a golden cocker spaniel who knew every member of the squadron intimately, was absurdly affectionate with each one of them, but took no notice of the members of any other squadron. As for officers in administrative jobs, well, nothing was too insulting for him to do to them. Possibly he had sensed in me a lifelong friend of his species and decided that to treat me as 'Administrative duties' might look like a betrayal of the canine world at large. But though he would occasionally deign to notice me, his attentions never lasted more than a few seconds. Even my efforts to tempt him with the presence of my own dogs failed. When suddenly Barthé and Billfox appeared upon the scene, he at first showed some surprise and even came up and sniffed at them, but the moment he spotted in the far distance one of the Hurricane boys laden with parachute, harness, lifebelt, and helmet, he ran away as fast as his legs would carry him. He jumped up the pilot, barking ecstatically as though greeting a long-lost master, and licked his hand, harness, and whatever part of the equipment he could reach with his tongue. As I discovered later, this pilot had joined the squadron on the same day on which I had come to Morley.

In the evening arrived Squadron Leader Smith who was to command the Poles at Morley. We dined together and I tried to explain to him some of the problems which he would have to tackle. He had never seen a Pole in his life and regarded them simply as 'aliens'. So I really meant it when before getting up I said, 'Good luck'. With his arrival, my own mission at Morley was ended.

XXX

I left Morley soon after seven and got back to Sleethole by nine. I reported immediately to the C.O. who announced that he was going to Ledley and suggested that I should accompany him. He hadn't been there yet and was anxious to see for himself what the flying of the Poles was like. So far, we had had no first-hand knowledge of it, and had to accept their claims at face value. For a week Sleethole had been buzzing with stories of the admiration of Ledley's British flying instructors for the aeronautical prowess of their latest pupils.

We left Sleethole in a heavy drizzle. By the time we had the Thames Estuary and the Medway behind us, patches of blue were appearing in the sky and when we reached Sevenoaks, there was not a cloud left. Under the brilliant sun, the scenery, with gentle hills and large maples and oaks dotted about in groups among fields, assumed a character of festive gaiety. The villages through which we passed looked as handsome and tidy as though they had only just left a painter's easel, and the whole country sparkled with contentment. It was possibly merely the contrast with the drabness of Sleethole that gave the scenery so radiant a character; but the C.O. too seemed to respond to it, and with every mile that further separated us from Sleethole, his mood improved. When during the beginning of our drive I gave him an account of my happy days at Morley, he remained silent, and I suspected that my enthusiastic words had evoked in him something like envy. Yet a short while later he began talking of his own travels, of friends, of his youth, and Sleethole and our 'show' no longer entered into our conversation.

Ledley, tucked away between some fields and a hill covered with beech woods, was a picture of contentment. Aeroplanes were in the air, Polish pupils and British instructors were sitting in the sun in front of the miniature mess; everyone seemed pleased with life. The Poles received the C.O. with unconcealed enthusiasm and the British instructors, hardly any of whom had ever met him before, were evidently impressed by the respect and the affection which he enjoyed among the Poles. But the C.O.'s main purpose was to find out about the latters' flying, and so after some brief general conversation, we withdrew with the local C.O. and the chief instructor to hear their report. Yes, the Poles were extremely eager and only too willing to learn; they were altogether delightful pupils to work with. Their general standard of flying was below that of our own airmen and their entire 'style' very different from ours. They were wont to treat the machines roughly, to throw them about rather violently, and to disregard strict flying discipline. The instructor was of course unable to say whether this was due to the flying regulations being more lax in their own country or to the fact that they had not flown for six months and were obviously out of practice. But it remained that discipline in the air was their weakest point. To illustrate his words he gave us some examples: one pilot when landing dived straight on to the middle of the landing ground without first making the necessary circuit round the aerodrome; another one took off without first taxi-ing across the aerodrome; the mapped out courses were seldom adhered to, and the pilots did not seem to mind if instead of reaching a certain point they reached one several miles away. On one occasion a Pole on his first solo flight saw a few Hurricanes circling above him; forgetting all about the particular circuit he had been ordered to make, he simply began to climb a couple of thousand feet in an attempt to join the Hurricanes. When reprimanded on his return, he merely replied that he wanted to find out whether his machine could catch up with the fighters. 'They have guts and they are daredevils,' the chief

instructor summed up his report, 'but they have a long way to go before they can be classified as on a par with their British colleagues. Discipline in the air, accuracy, and obedience to given orders—that's what they still have to learn.' We were then told that on the previous day the Director of Training from the Air Ministry had been visiting Ledley and, after what he had seen, decided that the course which originally was to last a fortnight should be prolonged to three weeks.

The C.O. took the chief instructor's report more seriously than I did. While he had accepted the Polish claims about their flying, I had always assumed that there was a good deal of braggadocio and youthful exaggeration in their statements. When we left in the afternoon he expressed pessimistic views regarding the future. It was for me to be the optimist, and I tried to assure him that there was no reason to feel dispirited. Obviously the Poles must first get more intimately acquainted with both British flying routine and British aircraft. Once the rough edges of their flying had been smoothed down they would prove themselves second to none. The faults they possessed could be eliminated by training and perseverance; their gifts, on the other hand, were of a nature that could not easily be acquired. And, after all, it was their keenness and determination and fighting spirit that would prove their main asset in operations.¹

XXXI

As so often before at Sleethole, a few satisfactory days had to be paid for dearly. My unimportant mission to Morley aroused a thousand jealousies, and the perennial coils of intrigue were drawing particularly tight round me. I should have minded this far less if I alone had been the sufferer. Unfortunately even my car, my dogs, and my very bedroom were victimized.

After our return from Ledley I went to my room in the mess to take the dogs for a walk. But my room was empty. Where were they? I asked my batman, who on the days when I was away would give them a run or take them out for a walk. Hadn't I taken them with me to Ledley? he asked in return. When he had come into my room before lunch to fetch them they hadn't been there. After spending two hours in frantic search, I finally discovered that some kindly lover of animals had taken the dogs to the furthest end of the aerodrome and there had tied them to a tree. The particular spot was more than a mile away from the nearest hut or road. They were too far away to be seen or heard by anyone, and it was only when I decided to get into my car and drive all over the aerodrome that I discovered them. I was almost choking with anger; but my fury was forced to evaporate ineffectively. For what could I do? Demand an official inquiry

¹ The brilliant record of the Polish airmen during the Battle of Britain and in the countless actions in which they took part throughout the war, provides a striking justification of my optimism.

from the C.O.? He was already burdened with more important official inquiries at the station. Moreover, I knew from experience that however convinced I might be of the identity of the culprits, it would be as impossible to establish proof of this latest misdeed as it had been of their assaults upon my car or any of their other acts of human kindness. Whatever my feelings towards them might have been, I had to admit that they stuck loyally to one another and that never had one hand washed another with greater perfection.

After three particularly trying days I came to the inevitable conclusion that only 'change of air' would re-establish my equilibrium, and asked the C.O. if I might take the week-end off. He consented and suggested that I might do a useful piece of work in London. I ought to try to see Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw to inquire about the matter of final command of the Polish air units in Britain and discuss with him the problem of discipline among our troops. I rang up Braynelaw's secretary in London and, to my surprise, he called me back only half an hour later, announcing that the A.V.-M. would be pleased to see me at 10 a.m. on Saturday. After putting my dogs under the care of the C.O.'s ever sympathetic wife I left Sleethole early on Saturday.

I presented myself punctually at ten o'clock and was received by Braynelaw's private secretary. After having abandoned his semi-civilian status the A.V.-M. had become the head of one of the most important departments at the Ministry and, as such, one of the busiest men there. While I waited three Air Vice-Marshals headed by an Air Marshal went into his room, carrying enormous maps under their arms. They left again a quarter of an hour later, and I was received without further delay.

It was only the second time that I met the A.V.-M. personally. In his 'splendiferous' room, as he called it in jest, in uniform and with rows of ribbons covering his broad chest, he looked even more impressive than he had done in civilian clothes. But he possessed the very rare gift of putting at ease an absurdly junior officer who, according to service precedence, should really have had no direct access to him. However deeply your civilian past might have been ingrained in you, the service soon made you regard a man half a dozen ranks above yourself as belonging to a different human species. I was therefore particularly grateful to find that there was still the twinkle in my host's eye and the same mixture of benevolent dignity and shrewdness. He offered me a very expensive-looking Egyptian cigarette but himself lit his pipe.

I explained our problem as briefly as I could, and asked in the C.O.'s name for Braynelaw's views. Since the Polish command at Sleethole enjoyed little authority with their men, it seemed undesirable, especially at a moment when the Polish venture was growing to such vast proportions, to let higher control slip entirely from British hands. According to the plan which Group Captain Milder was putting forward, a number of key posts in the Polish Air Force might possibly be duplicated temporarily

by British personnel, preferably in the form of liaison officers, advisers, and assistants.

The A.V.-M. listened attentively and interrupted frequently, putting questions very much to the point. After some discussion, he suggested that the C.O. should put all his points into a memorandum and he, Braynelaw, would take them up with the higher authorities at the Air Ministry and the Foreign Office. A framework could then be prepared for the forthcoming negotiations with General Sikorski, the Polish Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief who appeared to be fully conscious of the shaky authority of the local Polish command and, consequently, of our difficulties at Sleethole.

Then there was the question of some form of unifying liaison. Since the Poles were coming under the control of various Air Force commands, it was bound to complicate matters if there were not a man, thoroughly acquainted with the entire problem, to act as a central control or liaison officer. The obvious choice for such a job was Group Captain Milder. Braynelaw agreed and went into a number of details regarding my suggestion.

His patience and kindness emboldened me to mention a purely personal matter. It was my first intimate conversation with him, and so I explained that owing to the fact that I had been chosen for the Polish venture without Braynelaw's knowledge, the C.O. had regarded me originally as an intruder and even now showed occasional uncertainty and vacillation in his attitude to me. As for those who had been at Sleethole before me, they all regarded me as an interloper.

'I want to assure you,' Braynelaw interrupted, 'that I entirely agree with Corring's original choice, and I think he was very well advised in calling you into the service. I've kept an eye on you and I know that you've been pulling your weight all along. You are not only not suspect in my eyes but a hundred per cent *persona grata*.'

I thanked him for his words and then mentioned that before long my job with the Poles was likely to come to an end and that it was my ambition to be transferred for active service as an air-gunner.

'I will certainly help you when the time comes, but I believe that for the present Milder still needs you and I shouldn't like you to leave him now. But I promise to help you to achieve your ambition later on.'

When I got up Braynelaw suddenly looked at my sleeve. 'I see they've forgotten to give you your third ring,' he observed. 'We must take that up. It's absurd your being an F.L. Surely the Sleethole establishment allows for another Squadron Leader?'

'Well, sir, many who have been in the service far longer than I have are still Pilot Officers.'

'In war-time you get your rank not according to the length of time of your service but to the job for which you are wanted and to your qualifications. Anyhow, I'll take that up personally; and tell Milder, too, that we'll do all we can to help him.'

He got up from his chair and walked with me across his enormous

room to the door. Before I left him, he stopped and said with a broad grin, 'I myself am even more of a Woolworth airman than you, but I do know this much about the R.A.F., that whoever dances on our floor with us is never forgotten.'

My interview did a lot to restore my peace of mind. I might have been even more gratified, had I not learned during the preceding few months that in the service even the best intentions of the best of men easily came to naught—simply because overwork made them forget their promises and because in the rush of more important events they were unable to give much attention to minor issues. But on my way back through Saint James's Park I already saw myself perched in the gun turret of a Wellington flying with 941 Squadron over Germany.

XXXII

As if our combined efforts had borne some fruit, a few days later a sudden conference was called to settle certain matters in connection with the transfer of some hundred Poles to Nottings. After a great deal of telephoning it transpired that the conference would take place at the new H.Q. of Bomber Command situated at a secret address at N. I was to accompany the C.O. and the future C.O. of the Polish unit at Nottings who was spending a few days at Sleethole.

We left in the staff car soon after 7 a.m. and arrived at N. at half-past ten. The conference was to start at eleven. We had not been given the exact address of our destination and had been told to obtain it from the police station at N. So we stopped outside the red-brick building with its blue lamp and the white letters 'Police', and I went in to get the address. Unfortunately even my uniform proved an insufficient guarantee of my good faith and did not induce the duty sergeant to part with the requested information. He wanted to know on whose authority I was making my inquiry. Luckily I had in my pocket the chit with the name of the officer at Bomber Command who had told me to call at the police station. But that wasn't enough. Who was in the car? the police sergeant wanted to know. I gave the C.O.'s name and rank. Who was he? I explained his position at Sleethole, trying to give added significance to both the name of Sleethole and to the C.O.'s functions there by emphasizing my words in what I regarded as an impressive manner. But the sergeant remained unimpressed. Who else was in the car? 'Wing Commander Lord', I replied, and felt like adding, 'a most respectable gentleman and an exemplary officer'. Who was I? the sergeant wanted to know next. Well, wasn't it pretty obvious that I was a mere Flight Lieutenant and not an Air Chief Marshal, I replied. But I added that though I was only a Flight Lieutenant, I was also a passenger in a motor car on its way to a rather important conference that would be delayed owing to the many superfluous questions. Had I been a civilian, a similar examination would have made me

tremble in my shoes, but strengthened in my self-assurance by the knowledge that the whole power of the R.A.F. was behind me, I felt that I could afford to match haughtiness with irony. But neither the visible nor the more hidden attributes of my power seemed to impress the police sergeant who wanted to have details about my particular job in the R.A.F. and also about my function at the forthcoming conference. By that time, however, the last shreds of my patience had gone and I refused to supply him with any further information.

'If you doubt the truth of everything I am telling you,' I said in a voice worthy of royalty, 'how are you to know that what I state about myself is true? You had better come out and question the Group Captain personally.'

Somewhat reluctantly the sergeant decided to come with me into the street where our car was waiting. I was greeted by the C.O. with unconcealed annoyance. 'Really, R.L., this is the limit. You know the conference starts at eleven, and there you are keeping us waiting for quarter of an hour.'

I didn't say a word, nor did the sergeant, who undoubtedly had all the while only been obeying instructions. Without asking the C.O. a single question, he approached our driver and gave him the requisite details about our route. He might have done so ten minutes previously when he could have assured himself personally that the staff car with a Group Captain, a Wing Commander, and an R.A.F. driver was not a mere figment of my imagination. Or were German agents already going about the country in staff cars and camouflaged as R.A.F. officers? Yet since the sergeant had not checked up on my evidence, for all he knew we might have been a bunch of German agents on their way to blow up Bomber Command.

After driving for a few more miles we finally reached a wood in which a number of scattered houses were situated. Many of them were still unfinished and scores of masons and carpenters were moving about. Delivery vans and errand boys from the near-by town were going to and fro with their goods; farmers, women, and children were attending to whatever were their duties, and it was self-evident that several hundred people with possibly less impeccable credentials than those of three R.A.F. officers, knew all about this hideout of the mighty. 'I wonder how many German agents are among this crowd who come here every day,' the C.O. remarked when we finally stopped.

Except for the somewhat emphatic Edgar Wallace methods of keeping the locality secret, I was impressed by the wisdom with which the site for the important H.Q. had been chosen and the efficiency with which the various buildings had been fitted into the landscape. Whereas the usual practice in England would seem to be to precede the building of a new house by the cutting down of all surrounding trees, Bomber Command had cut down the trees on the actual building sites only. Otherwise the place had remained a wood with the trees coming right up to the windows. Probably no house whatsoever could be seen from the air.

The individual buildings were handsome and well-proportioned and exhaled the atmosphere of a country club. The mess where we had lunch was airy, with light wood panelling on the walls, and with, at least, an Air Commodore on every second and an Air Marshal on every fourth chair. I couldn't help wondering whether my co-feeders at lunch had ever beheld such a thing as a Flight Lieutenant in their company. I must have been as rare a bird as Air Marshals were at Sleethole.

The conference took place in a large room that might have been the directors' sanctum of one of the more opulent companies in the City. Needless to say, I was the most junior officer present, and the youth next to me, with the dark eyes and slender face of a Mediterranean urchin, was a Squadron Leader.

The longer I was in the R.A.F. the more I realized that to bear fruit a conference should not consist of more than half a dozen people. If there were more—we were fifteen—barely half would possess that thorough knowledge of the subject under discussion without which speedy results were hard to achieve. Once again, most of our time was taken in explaining to the members of the conference what our problems were. One of the senior officers had never heard that a Polish Air Force was being trained in this country. Yet the conference was not altogether without its merits, for at last Bomber Command were learning about our problems; and that in itself was an important step forward.

XXXIII

I have almost forgotten to mention Waterham, the only town within twenty miles of Sleethole and the only place where the Poles could find change and relaxation after the dreariness of our camp. Waterham was a townlet of minor naval significance with one drab main street, dank one-story houses, a large army barracks of yellow brick, a couple of cinemas, numerous pubs, and two dancing places operating on alternate nights. Whatever the virtues of Waterham may have been they certainly were not aesthetic, and the place hardly seemed designed to make effective propaganda either for the beauties or the amenities of England. As a rule, any place with the smell of the sea, with ships in the background and naval folk in the streets, has fascination. But instead of naval romance, Waterham offered only squalid Victorian architecture and the whole place appeared to have been soaked in oil paint of that rust-brown colour described by facetious people as 'bloody Victorian'. For men, however, whose knowledge of England did not transcend the bleak horizon of Sleethole and who throughout the week never set eyes on a woman, shop, cinema, pub, or any other kind of civilian distraction, Waterham must have been as good as Plymouth or Portsmouth.

Since the arrival of the Poles the stock of Waterham's womanhood had naturally risen a hundredfold. Though the number of Polish airmen with Saturday or Sunday leave was limited to a fraction of their full comple-

ment, even that small number was sufficient to give Waterham the appearance of a predominantly Polish town. There cannot have been many local girls left who were not courted by the Continental newcomers. It is perhaps unnecessary to record that the Poles, pastmasters in the arts of love, were very popular with the female population who no doubt welcomed their advances as an exhilarating change after the more stolid arts of their own menfolk. Even so, rumour reached our H.Q. that some pimp in London had approached the local authorities with the respectful suggestion that a cartload of professional young ladies from London should be exported to Waterham. The city fathers refused the preposterous offer, but I sometimes wondered whether the morals of the local girls continued to maintain their former high standards and, if not, whether those morals might not have been better safeguarded had the outraged authorities not rejected the offer of the enterprising gentleman from London.

Be that as it may, the British officers at Sleethole whose professional zeal was invariably and miraculously brought to life whenever it was a matter of 'exposing' the Poles, reported to the C.O. that the behaviour of these latter at Waterham called for immediate action. Polish officers fraternized with their own men—what a relief this would have been at least to the liaison officer had it really been true—walked about with them in the streets, visited pubs and dancing places with them, and, worst of all, adopted towards the local ladies an attitude that was altogether too blatant and thus incompatible with the wearing of the King's uniform.

The C.O. instantly investigated the complaints and on two evenings we went together to Waterham to observe the Polish outrages for ourselves. In the end we realized that there was nothing wrong about the behaviour of the Poles. True, their standards of conduct were different from ours. It wasn't so much that what they actually did was wrong as that, untrained in the arts of a certain type of camouflage, they didn't emulate their British colleagues in drawing a veil over their actions. Whereas British amorous escapades were usually pursued only after dark and were cautiously covered up, the Poles, suffering from few inhibitions, did not care who recognized the true aim of their flirtations. They never pretended that the purpose of their courtship was to discuss aeronautics or next Saturday's football match. Being more exuberant, they would not hang around murky corners waiting for Dulcinea but enjoyed promenading with their prospective lady loves in the full glare of daylight, if the dingy opaqueness of Waterham could be called 'daylight'.

Nevertheless, I was the last to belittle the importance of keeping up appearances. Though many of the forms which British amorous life adopts may be traced to fear and an inherent sex hypocrisy, many others are inspired by self-discipline and by the knowledge that the less the animal impulse is permitted to manifest itself openly the less likely is it to make of you its slave. But when all was said, I doubted whether it was such psychological considerations as these that had prompted Sleethole's self-appointed moralists to draw the C.O.'s attention to the latest Polish 'outrage'.

Chapter Three

KNOCKING AT THE GATE

I

Two days before Easter I mentioned to the C.O. that I had applied for Easter leave but that I couldn't make up my mind whether to go home.

'If I were you I should certainly go,' he said, 'nowadays you never can tell what might happen and if you wait you may find that several days' absence at a stretch won't be possible for you.'

'Yet there are so many things to be done for our show,' I replied. I had not finished the sentence when a fascinating idea came to me. 'What about my going to Manhill for Easter?' I said and suddenly felt aglow with excitement. 'Before I left Manhill, I asked Group Captain Windlow whether, if I got a chance, I might occasionally come back to visit the place, and he said yes. If I go, I might pick up some useful information about latest developments in our bomber organization. After all, the syllabus on which our training centre bases itself consists of practically nothing but pre-war stuff. . . .'

'That's an excellent idea,' the C.O. replied, apparently catching my enthusiasm. 'Yes, go and try to find out something about their latest navigation methods, cockpit drill, air firing. We may be able to incorporate that information into our syllabus. Ring up Group Captain Windlow and ask him in my name whether he can have you for Easter, and try to be ready to get off to-night. We shan't have much work to do here during the next few days.'

I thanked him more warmly than I did normally, returned to my room, and immediately put a call through to Manhill. Even while I was sitting in my room waiting for Manhill to reply, Sleethole seemed to have disappeared from my view and the immediate future was bright. When Manhill came through I asked for the C.O. Within a second or so I heard Group Captain Windlow's voice. 'Who is that?' I gave my name. He couldn't make it out so I spelt it. 'Oh, it's you! We were wondering what had happened to you. When are you coming to see us?' I then explained the reason for my telephone call and passed on the C.O.'s message. 'By all means, come to-day, the boys will be glad to see you.'

Only after I had replaced the receiver did I realize fully that I was going to Manhill. The subsequent feeling of excitement never left me throughout the day. Finding out about trains, packing my suitcase, finishing my work at H.Q.—all became exhilarating occupations. I decided to spend the night in London and continue my journey by the first train next morning.

And, to keep in tune with the spirit of adventure, I would not ask any of my friends to put me up for the night but would go to a hotel.

Only towards the end of the afternoon did I hear myself asking the question, 'What if the visit proves a disappointment? Have I not been idealizing Manhill all along? Isn't it merely the contrast with Sleethole that makes me place Manhill on so exalted a pinnacle? Would it not be wiser to retain the idealized picture rather than replace it by a less alluring reality?'

Though I had been in London only a week previously, the town seemed to have acquired a new and uncommon appearance, background to adventure. I went straight from Victoria Station to a near-by hotel at which I had never stayed before, and had dinner at a restaurant that was strange to me and where I was not likely to meet anyone I knew. Thus I could continue undisturbed to enjoy the foretaste of my visit and had no need to think or talk of anything else. Though the streets of London had never looked more beautiful, I returned to my hotel soon after dinner and was in bed by ten.

No, I had not been wrong, and the Manhill I had been dreaming of during the previous months was not a figment of my imagination. True, when I arrived my state of mind might have been that of some romantic youth; but my romanticism was founded on reality.

Harry Thwaites was unfortunately away on Easter leave, Linnes and several of the other old friends had gone for ever, but, thank God, quite a number were still there. When I greeted them I had to exercise a good deal of self-control not to betray my elation. However critical I tried to be, I found it as incomprehensible as ever that both Manhill and Sleethole should belong to the same R.A.F. Even more than during my original stay I realized that the people at Manhill seemed to represent a different type of humanity altogether. The sense of comradeship, the natural and undemonstrative idealism, the professional keenness of the year before were, if anything, even more pronounced. The food and the mess in general had lost none of their former quality, and by contrast with the warmth and cleanliness of my room at Manhill, my bedroom at Sleethole, bare, cold, uncomfortable, never quite clean, seemed like a sordid dream.

A raid was planned for the night, and I spent most of the day watching its preparations, but first I went to call on Wing Commander Kellett at his room in squadron H.Q. Even though I had been warned beforehand, I got a real shock when I saw him. I knew that he was suffering from some pernicious form of rheumatism, yet my mind was still filled with the reports about him that I had seen some months previously. They spoke of his leadership in some of the biggest raids of the war and of the decorations that he had been awarded. When I entered his room he was standing by his writing-table, leaning heavily on a stick. His face was so thin that it seemed to have no flesh at all but to consist merely of bones over which a

parchment-coloured skin was stretched. His body appeared shrunken, yet his legs moved with so much difficulty that it seemed as if they lacked strength even to carry that frail burden.

'It's nice to see you haven't forgotten us,' he greeted me with a tired smile.

'I'm terribly sorry to hear of your illness, sir,' I replied.

'Oh, I'm all right now', he tried to smile again, but in his eyes was the same stern look of an eagle, and the thin and almost ascetic mouth was that of a man fanatically devoted to a cause.

For a moment I felt so distressed at the sight of evident suffering that I didn't know what to say. As though guessing my thoughts Kellett smiled again. 'I was getting on quite well, but on the raid of December the 18th it was rather cold. I got nasty frostbites and they kept me in hospital for two months. But I'm quite cured and all I need now is to regain my strength and build up my muscles. They seem to have gone completely. The doctors wanted me to recuperate in hospital but I might as well do it here and be of some use.' He then proceeded to sit down. He did it slowly, helping his legs with one hand and supporting himself by holding on to the table with the other.

After I had questioned him on all the various matters related to our syllabus for the Poles, I told him of my ambition to become an air-gunner and, if possible, to serve under him in his squadron. Would he have me?

'I suppose you know by now what air-gunnery means and what I demand of my men? If you are determined to continue and Air Ministry release you from your present job, I should love you to come and join us. Keep in touch with me and let me know when you are likely to leave the Poles. Then I'll tell you what to concentrate on in your training.'

I left in a state of such inner elation that outwardly it expressed itself in complete confusion.

I then went to the briefing room where all the crews were assembled. A few minutes later Kellett came in to brief them. Besides actual bombing they were to bring in reports on German canal locks, beacons, barrage balloons, river traffic. 'Don't approach neutral territory,' he told them, 'don't come down too low. You may scuttle a few balloons if you want to, but do it on your own and don't ask officially whether you may do it or not.'

After he had gone, there was plenty for everyone to talk about and the general excitement was intense. The prevailing elation seemed to reflect my own inner state and I gave myself up to it as happily as if I too were going on the night's raid. As they formed themselves into individual crews, officers and sergeants conversing on terms of complete equality, the pilots, navigators, wireless operators, and air-gunners set out to discuss the tasks for the night.

I returned to the briefing room in the afternoon. The navigators were still working on their courses, but the morning's animation had gone and

the other members of the crews were beginning to get drowsy. By three o'clock most of them retired to their own bedrooms to get some sleep.

They took off at seven, and I went to the Ops. Room where the atmosphere was rather more tense than I remembered it the last time I spent the best part of a night there. The weather over the Channel and over Germany was atrocious. Many of the aircraft were signalling back asking for their bearings. I remained in the Ops. Room until the aircraft returned, which was at 2.30 a.m. Three had crashed over France, but the crews of two of them had saved themselves by parachute. In the terrible weather not a single crew had been able either to find their objective or to see anything.

Though it was nearly four when I retired to bed, I got up early on Easter Sunday and came down to breakfast soon after eight. The only person present was Peter Myers, one of the pilots of the night raid, a stocky, short fellow with overflowing vitality and a mop of straw-coloured hair. Few men had been over Germany more frequently than Peter.

'Bloody show last night,' he greeted me, 'the worst I've ever been on, rain and cloud down to five hundred feet and we saw bloody nothing, except the searchlights. Lord, what a trip. I'm glad to be back.' Yet he was cheerful and looked exactly as he had done on the previous afternoon when I had helped him to wash his car and he had driven me about the aerodrome. His hand, however, trembled so badly that he could hardly hold his cup in it. 'Well, I'll have a shave now,' he said after he had finished, 'and go to bed for the rest of the day.' He gave me one of his genial smiles and walked towards the door. I noticed then that his broad shoulders were drooping like those of an old man.

Soon after Peter had gone, Wing Commander Kellett, as usual one of the earliest birds, came into the dining-room. He was walking slowly, leaning on his stick and moving his tortured body with difficulty. But my mind still circled round the three crashed aeroplanes, the flight through fog and rain, and what seemed to me an unnecessary waste of men and machines.

'Don't you think, sir,' I addressed Kellett rather impertinently though deferentially, 'that it wasn't worth risking the lives of so many young men on a night which we knew to be hopeless and where nothing could be seen? Wasn't it just a waste of effort?'

Kellett's expression hardened. 'How are the crews to learn their job properly?' he said, looking me straight in the eyes. 'Even if they don't find their target, what matters is that they get wartime experience, get accustomed to flying through searchlights and ack-ack fire, learn to navigate in the dark without pin-pointing.' Though he spoke quietly, almost gently, the finality in his voice showed that he would tolerate no other point of view. His uncompromising words and his stern, ascetic face suddenly made me think of a High Court Judge pronouncing sentence. Yet I know that

no-one cared more for the members of his squadron than he did and that the preceding night must have meant real anguish to him.

After the night's foul weather, the appearance of the sun in the morning was a wonderful Easter surprise. All operations for the day having been called off, the whole place basked in an atmosphere of uncommon peace. For once there was no standing by, no preparing of machine-guns, no plotting of courses, no hanging around in the crew room waiting for the word Go. In the anteroom all the windows stood wide open and the sunlight floated through them in golden profusion. Most of the officers spent the morning sitting on the lawn in front of the mess, basking in the sun, reading, gossiping, and, chiefly, drowsing. Everyone seemed to feel at peace, and though you could see the Wellingtons dispersed about the aerodrome, the war might have been a thousand miles away, and Manhill had the appearance of a country club. I inhaled this atmosphere of contentment and felt equally grateful for the stretch of grass on which I lay, for the warm sun above, for my companions and for life in general.

Wing Commander Crosby, C.O. of 00 Squadron at Grazeville, had asked me to lunch and I drove there soon after twelve and did not return to Manhill till three. I spent most of the afternoon interviewing Group Captain Windlow, the chief signals officer, intelligence officer, and one or two others to collect the information which Group Captain Milder had asked me to bring back. When I told the chief intelligence officer of Kellett's willingness to have me in the event of my being allowed to become an air-gunner, the Wing Commander said, 'Are you so sick of life that you want to get killed? You'd be far more useful in Intelligence. If you want to come back to Manhill, why don't you apply for an intelligence job instead? I should love to have you here and with your intimate knowledge of Germany I'm sure we should be able to employ you usefully.'

When I left Manhill, I no longer felt sad as I had done during my previous departure from there. For this time the farewell also bore the promise of return.

II

I arrived back at Sleethole after tea and rang up the C.O. at once. He asked me to call on him at his house, and I gave him a verbal report of the more official part of my visit and promised to be ready within two days with a detailed written report.

The C.O. listened to my enthusiastic account with a sort of mischievous twinkle in his eye, and, when I had finished, observed, 'Well, and now tell me about the more important part of your visit.' He put a special emphasis on the word 'important', but the twinkle was still in his eye.

'What do you mean, sir?' I asked, and instantly blushed.

The C.O. laughed. 'It's no good your trying to keep secrets from me.

Don't imagine I'm stupid enough not to know what the true purpose of your visit was. Well, what about it? What did Kellett say?'

So I proceeded to report fully upon my conversation with Kellett and his willingness to have me as an air-gunner. I also mentioned that no-one at Manhill could give me any advice as to how to get round the difficulty regarding my eyes. Kellett had dismissed the Air Ministry's routine objections with a wave of the hand. 'Since you never fly without goggles, why shouldn't you have special lenses in them?' he had said. Unfortunately the authorities did not share that sensible view.

'I have always been frank with you,' the C.O. began after I had reached the end of my tale, 'and I shall be so now. I feel that my job at Sleethole will soon come to an end and I may be attached to the Polish Inspectorate General in London which is apparently going to be formed. Whether at the Inspectorate there will be room for you I don't know, but I doubt it. So I think it may be wisest for you to stick to your idea of becoming an air-gunner. From my end I'll do all I can to help. I'll go to London to speak to Group Captain McFaden at the Medical Board myself, to ask whether he can pass you. You can be sure of my support.'

III

DIARY

Two friends to whom I had written about my ambition to become an air-gunner have replied to me in almost identical terms, 'Surely you can employ your knowledge and experience in a more useful way. Why be wasted as an air-gunner?' is the main theme of their letters. Yet are we useful in a job only when we are doing whatever comes most natural to us? My ever-increasing desire to become an air-gunner is not the result of a somewhat belated craving for adventure, as both my friends imply. Adventure either in terms of danger or speed is the last thing to appeal to me, and 'heroism' in battle is so alien to my entire nature that it never enters my thoughts. What I do feel about air-gunnery is that it would bring me into more intimate touch with reality, with action and, above all, with real people. As an air-gunner I should have to take an active part in the war and share my life with people who do likewise. My age and my limited mechanical gifts? . . . Well, it transpired from all my conversations at Manhill that in modern air war technical knowledge alone is not the decisive factor. What both Kellett and Crosby seemed to regard as desirable for their squadrons are one or two older officer air-gunners who apart from their technical knowledge possess common sense and experience of life, and who would help to animate the esprit de corps of all the younger air-gunners and, altogether, contribute some of the moral element which is as valuable as technical abilities and physical strength.

I know that my desire is not altogether unselfish. I certainly do aspire to get back to Manhill, but it is not the fleshpots of Suffolk that lure me. Manhill stands for me for what is finest in the R.A.F., and has always proved wholesome to my own morale. When I was at Manhill last year all thought

of promotion or of the future was completely wiped out and my sole ambition was to play my part in the business of war. Sleethole has always frightened me; purely personal considerations claim as large a share in my deliberations as does the actual job. In the course of my conversations with Windlow and Kellett I told them that it meant absolutely nothing to me if, in order to become an air-gunner, I had to give up my present rank, go back to P.O. and content myself with a very subordinate position. At Manhill such an attitude of mind was to me the most natural in the world; yet here I know I should find it almost impossible to be indifferent to my position and rank.

True, if it were not for the Polish venture and, thus, for Sleethole, I might possibly never have joined the R.A.F. at all. Both, therefore, can lay claim to my gratitude. But I feel that with my last few months here I have fully repaid my debt. Sleethole has proved a more gruelling job than I have ever experienced before. Yet is the fault entirely Sleethole's? . . . I daren't face this question squarely, for I suspect that the answer would be negative. Yet each day anew I run away from it. Why? Perhaps because I feel dead tired, not physically, but mentally. To live constantly in an atmosphere of subterfuge combined with antagonism has in the long run a demoralizing effect. At Manhill I felt as though I were advancing both as an individual and as a member of the R.A.F. Sleethole brought nothing but retrogression. I am perpetually conscious of falling below my own standards, yet too cowardly or complacent to do anything about it.

If it were not for the C.O. I should have made up my mind some weeks ago, for in spite of what Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw said the other day, I doubt whether I am still needed here. The Polish show is beginning to stand on its own feet, and soon it will probably come altogether under Polish control. In a month or so the C.O. will definitely have no further need of me.

Kellett advised me to concentrate on the Browning gun and the gun turret and to try to learn something about map-reading and navigation. I shall certainly follow his advice.

IV

DIARY

When the first Polish contingents arrived at Sleethole there were a good many of our officers who set about their job with enthusiasm. To-day among themselves few of them refer to our guests in complimentary terms. It is useless to try to tell them that the Poles must not be judged by purely local experiences and that their behaviour is largely the result of all that they have undergone before they arrived in this country. Our officers judge the Poles by the hundred and one little things that appear irritating and that in Sleethole's atmosphere easily assume exaggerated proportions. In a place like this nothing remains secret, and the slightest Polish 'misdeed' instantly becomes common knowledge. Last year at Bentley I realized how easily the atmosphere of a training camp can demoralize men who are meant to be fighters. 'The happy family is the squadron,' wrote T. E. Lawrence while in the R.A.F., 'and the misery . . . is resident in depots. . . .'¹ Can we be

¹ The Letters of T. E. Lawrence (Jonathan Cape).

surprised if men are disheartened when, after having actually fought in the war, they are condemned to spend month after month leading the comparatively inactive life of schoolboys?

When all is said, it must be admitted that the petty wangles and scroungings among the Polish troops are hardly worse than those among our own men. Yet they are judged far more severely by our officers. Though one may not always go so far as to say tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner, I feel one might try to understand more so as at least to become more tolerant to all.

It is obvious that human nature and national traditions cannot be altered within the space of a few brief months. British standards of self-discipline, team spirit and an underlying decency cannot be attained merely by the adoption of such external customs as smoking a pipe, carrying one's handkerchief in one's sleeve instead of in one's pocket, wearing a British uniform and adhering to certain superficial British habits of behaviour. Conditions are supposed to make the man, but it requires much time for them to do so.

It is unfortunate that their activities at Sleethole give the Poles few opportunities to demonstrate their chivalry, courage, and patriotism—which seem among their foremost virtues—but afford them countless occasions for exhibiting their shortcomings. Many of them are charming, good-mannered, brilliant talkers, and generally very easy to get on with. But the very atmosphere of Sleethole seems to render difficult any manifestation of these qualities. Furthermore, the example of their British colleagues here is certainly not such as to fire them with the ambition to show themselves at their best. I have little doubt that at Morley, Ledley, and Nottings, or whatever other station they may be sent to, they will reveal themselves in a far better light than they have done here. Quite apart from its own peculiarly undesirable influence, Sleethole had the misfortune to become acquainted with the Poles before they had had time to shake off the effects of their defeat and evacuation. Before they arrived we assumed that their one thought would be to get ready to fight the Hun, and that they would leave such questions as job-hunting and rank entirely to their British colleagues. We expected that the generous pay which they now receive would induce them to make every effort to save up for the time when they could return to their own country. It is to me personally a cause of great disappointment that they have failed to do so, for when they first arrived the C.O. entrusted me with the job of explaining our savings scheme to them and trying to popularize it among them. Yet in spite of my persistent efforts and also of those of our most zealous and kindly senior accountant officer, hardly any of them seems to have begun to put money aside. They have very few expenses, and no officer or sergeant should find it difficult to save several pounds a month. But the officers visit London every week-end they get leave, frequent expensive restaurants there, buy costly suitcases and other non-essentials, and seem to concentrate on how best to spend their pay on a 'good time'. Yet, knowing Sleethole as I do, can I blame them?

V

My visit to Manhill was not altogether unproductive. Upon my return I prepared a detailed account of what I had learned from the commanding officers in the various branches of the operational squadron, and their evidence showed that bomber activities in modern warfare demand a maximum not only of technical ability and knowledge but equally of discipline. Without strictest flying discipline a bomber unit could not keep its formation, and to break away from the formation was as good as suicide. Later in the war some newer tactics might be evolved, but at the moment it seemed that closest formation flying was the method advocated by everyone in a position to judge. I stressed this aspect in my report, and it was this very point which was immediately taken up by the few people amongst whom the C.O. circularized it—Wing Commander Bullard, head of our training centre, the chief instructor, and the chief educational officer. What the C.O. and I had known all along, these senior colleagues of mine learned only gradually: namely that the weakest point in the make-up of our guests was discipline. My report seemed to have shaken old Bullard and the chief instructor, and they reacted to it in what I considered the only wise way. They sent out to the C.O. their own suggestions in which they stated that, in view of the high demands made upon the crews of Wellingtons—and we were training the Poles on the assumption that they would fly Wellingtons—it was essential to instil into our guests some of that discipline that appeared to be self-understood among our own operational officers and men.

VI

Early in April German aircraft began to appear over our neighbourhood and there were reports of the first German bombs on British territory. A huge aerodrome, situated at an accessible and exposed spot and completely uncamouflaged, was not the ideal place for a mother with a child, and quite naturally the C.O. became alarmed about his wife and little son. He decided to evacuate them from Sleethole and asked whether he might rent for them my house at Stoughton. I gladly accepted his offer, delighted that once again my house would be inhabited.

After Mrs. Milder's departure the C.O. lived by himself in the big house, but he decided to have his meals in the mess. This was an advantage for all the officers as the quality of our cooking suddenly improved. But I knew how lonely the C.O. was. After meals he would wander rather aimlessly through the mess not quite knowing what to do with himself. He and his wife were an exceptionally devoted couple, and after her departure he felt utterly lost. Spending, as he did, long hours in the ante-room for the first time, he realized how uncongenial the mess was. I persuaded him to have at least breakfast at home and arranged with his batman always to have tea ready for him in the afternoon. Whenever he had

nothing to do I tried to keep him occupied. At the same time I was conscious that my constant company might easily get on his nerves.

VII

Surprisingly enough it was Snithers who was the first to desert the Sleethole community, one that he always claimed to be so deeply attached to. How he had managed it was a mystery to everyone. But one day a signal arrived from the Air Ministry announcing that the 'prince among men' was being posted to the far north to join an operational station, always preferable to a training one, and in this case one famous for its high standards and its mess.

When he came to say good-bye to me I felt unable to deny myself the pleasure of treating him to the only monologue he had ever had to endure from me in all those endless months.

'Good luck to you, Snithers,' I said, 'and I hope your good fortune may induce you to treat your new colleagues not as though they were either slum children or chorus girls.'

For a second or two his face looked blank as if he had failed to understand what I had said. But then he began to roar. 'Capital, capital joke, R.L. Ha, ha, ha,' he laughed, 'chorus girls, ha, ha, chorus girls, capital. That was a brilliant idea of yours. Of course, chorus girls. Ha, ha, ha.'

He shook me warmly by the hand, and that was the last I saw of him.

VIII

I could endure Sleethole on weekdays because I was busy most of the day and my moments in the mess were brief, but a Sunday in the camp was never easy to put up with and, whenever possible, I tried to arrange my duty journeys for a Saturday and to keep away from Sleethole on Sunday. On the Sunday following Easter, however, I was duty officer and couldn't escape. Fortunately the C.O. had called a conference for eleven-thirty at his house; so that most of the morning would be occupied. Soon after breakfast I went to my office to put into final shape the material required for the conference. The meeting lasted till lunch when we all went to the mess.

'What will you be doing this afternoon, sir?' I asked the C.O. before he left the mess after lunch.

'I don't know what to do with myself,' he replied and added rather unexpectedly and piteously, 'I miss my wife terribly. When she is here I can work at home, but now I can't. And I couldn't bear to spend the afternoon in the mess. I'll probably go home and prune the roses in our garden.'

His desolation at finding himself without his family was pathetic and I felt sorry for him as I watched him walking from the mess towards his house.

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After toying with the Sunday papers for an hour I went across to the C.O.'s house to collect some files that he had promised to leave for me. In the garden Group Captain Milder was pruning the roses.

'What are you going to do this afternoon?' he asked.

'Nothing in particular, sir. I've done all my work, and at Sleethole there aren't even any roses for me to prune,' I tried to be facetious.

'Why don't you stay and have a cup of tea with me?' and he made his voice sound as casual as possible. He was afraid to have tea by himself in the large empty house. I had scarcely accepted when he exclaimed, 'Dammit, we can't have tea here because it's my batman's Sunday out.'

The note of despair in his voice made me laugh. 'I may be a rotten liaison officer, sir, but I do know how to boil a kettle and how to cut bread and butter it. If you go on with your roses, sir, I'll rummage in your kitchen.'

I found the bread and butter and even some delicious biscuits; prepared the tea and brought the whole lot ceremoniously into the drawing-room. The C.O. became more talkative than he had been for some time, and after we had finished tea suggested a walk.

The watery sun that had been shining on and off throughout the afternoon had disappeared behind clouds and it had turned cold, but the air was crisp and invigorating. We walked round the whole aerodrome, a distance of several miles, and the dogs had the time of their lives—several rabbits having imprudently crossed our path. When we reached the C.O.'s house it was nearly six. I saluted and said good-bye.

'Won't you come in and listen to the news?' he asked.

So I went in with him. The problems we had discussed during our walk had been thrashed out from every possible angle and there were few topics left. Conversation with a person whom you see continually can be even more difficult than with one whom you see only very seldom. But even covering and recovering old ground must have seemed less undesirable to the C.O. than spending a solitary Sunday in a house that had become so empty.

I didn't get back to the mess until dinner. A quarter of an hour later the C.O. appeared in the dining-room which was practically deserted. Most of the Polish officers were spending the week-end in London and the vast room was uncommonly silent. Its silence added to the sense of loneliness that had characterized the whole of the day. Even without the visible presence of homeless foreigners you realized that Sleethole was an island removed from everything that stood for home and true companionship—indeed it was a refuge for *émigrés*.

For some time we had been expecting the visit of General Dobry, possibly the new C-in-C. of the Polish air units in Britain, who was also spoken of as the future Inspector General of the Polish Air Force in this country.

On the day for which his visit was scheduled the General arrived punctually at eleven. I was with the C.O. at the entrance gate to await him,

and Colonel Sok was also there, together with *two* A.D.C.s. From the moment I first set eyes on the General—whose frankness of expression was enhanced by a strange sadness in the eyes—I felt drawn to him. He had been the senior Polish Air Force officer during the campaign of September 1939 and within a few brief weeks had seen his life's work wiped out, his country desecrated, his own position ruined. The C.O. told me later that the General's hair had been black when he had visited him in Poland seven or eight months previously; when he arrived at Sleethole it was practically white, giving his youthful, somewhat romantic face an added attraction. His charm was not like the drawing-room glamour of some of the officers at Sleethole, but seemed to come from a genuine warmth of heart. I was glad to know that the C.O. had a very high opinion of him.

More than anyone else at Sleethole the C.O. had been looking forward to the General's visit and anxious for an early heart-to-heart talk. Colonel Sok, who no doubt knew of this, was eager to forestall the C.O. and present his 'story' to the General first.

At luncheon, following the ceremonial parade, I sat opposite the C.O. and our distinguished guest. The General spoke no English and the two carried on their conversation in a German that was equally shaky on both sides. So often I had to act as interpreter.

Later in the day the C.O. told me that after lunch General Dobry had inquired with studied casualness who the officer was who spoke 'such good Polish'. When the C.O. told him my name, the General replied that he had already heard it mentioned. 'You'll hear it mentioned even more often during your conversations at Polish H.Q.', the C.O. answered with what he called 'a very obvious grin'. Yet our guest had evidently been forewarned, for during a very brief talk which even Colonel Sok's vigilance and ingenuity had proved unable to circumvent, he mentioned to the C.O. that he had come to Sleethole to find things out for himself and not to base his opinions on gossip. It appeared that throughout the Polish camps in France, gossip about Sleethole, both good and bad, had been rife.

In the evening there was Dinner Night with its traditional six courses, all equally tasteless, with the toasts, the speeches, the hilarious game of snooker. General Dobry who had never played snooker in his life, stopped after half an hour and, after talking to several of his officers, by degrees approached me with, I presumed, the idea of 'vetting' me. But he spoke mainly of the Polish campaign of the previous year and of German air tactics, and only towards the end did he begin to ask me about Sleethole. Yet even then he remained cautious and evidently preferred to let me do the talking rather than disclose any of his own views on that subject.

I heartily agreed with the C.O. when on the following morning he expressed the conviction that if General Dobry had been at Sleethole from the very beginning our entire show would have run far more smoothly

and without many of the difficulties which had so grievously hampered us. There was no doubt that if he remained with us discipline would improve and the authority of the Polish officers be definitely established.

IX

Fire a man with an inspiring idea and he easily forgets himself and rises above everything that is base within him. This obvious truth was brought home to everyone by the events following unexpectedly upon the visit of General Dobry. Suddenly our mess acquired a semblance of what an officers' mess should be like. Overnight the little cliques were swept away; talk became frank and gave the impression of being free from hidden motives; personal gossip ceased. For the first time Sleethole appeared to be united. Yet however beneficial the immediate effects of the General's visit might have been, it was not his presence that had wrought the miracle. It needed the German invasion of Scandinavia and the news of naval battles in the northern waters to bring the change about. But there was no mistaking that change. Men who had been wont to disappear at once after dinner to keep a date at Waterham or in some pub closer at hand, were spending every free moment in the anteroom waiting for the news on the wireless; yet though the note of tension was dominant both in the general atmosphere and in the expression of each individual face, it was blended with one of contentment, almost of happiness. You only sense that note in a community of men who, for the time being, have submerged their own personalities and recognize some common aim which automatically welds them together.

A few minutes before the official version of the northern campaign came through on the wireless, the general impatience had become almost unbearable. But it was no longer the usual impatience of two hundred individual Poles and Britons, staff officers and flying men, Colonel Sok or members of the 'old gang'; it was the quivering impatience of one great body, sharing identical expectations, hopes, and fears, thinking and feeling in unison. People who had never spoken to one another before stood arm in arm, and after the news had come to an end they talked together freely and unselfconsciously as if they had been old friends.

The martial winds that had so unexpectedly swept over the fjords of Norway, blew away the overshadowing mists of our ill-begotten mess as if by magic.

X

DIARY

General Dobry's visit has meant a good deal of additional work and the events in Scandinavia have made me spend every free moment in the anteroom near the wireless. Even this diary has become a victim of recent events and has been neglected for several days.

To-day, however, personal life has once again asserted itself and for the moment has overshadowed for me the greater events outside. The immediate

cause of this has been a letter from Manhill. It was from Clifford Ash, the chief air-gunnery officer at 941 Squadron, a young Flight Lieutenant with a particularly fine record in the R.A.F. If I ever see my ambitions fulfilled it will be Ash who will be my immediate chief. 'As far as 941 is concerned,' Ash writes, 'we shall be ready to have you as soon as you are trained, and if there is a vacancy at the time. I do not think there should be any difficulty about the latter.'

Not for a long time have I felt so strong an uprush of joy. The doors to Manhill seem to be opening and, what is more, the final decision has been put practically into my own hands. 'As soon as you are trained . . .' The words sound to me like music and I repeat them over and over again until nothing of them remains except the word 'soon'. I should be able to finish my preliminary training here within the next few weeks. My instructors have been very reassuring on this point and the only thing that casts a shadow over my elation is the unfavourable medical report about my eyes. Yet if this diary is to provide a really faithful mirror, I am bound to confess that at times I am still waging an inner war, a war that usually does not begin until the middle of the night when I suddenly wake up and hear a voice asking, 'Is it right for you to become an air-gunner? Is this not a purely selfish ambition? Would you not be more useful in a job for which you are better suited by nature?' I oppose that voice with a hundred arguments, yet it will not be silenced, keeping me awake for hours. Not until daylight do I recover my peace of mind and tell myself that there was no reason to argue. The war is beginning in good earnest. Surely fate will step in and decide for me.

XI

DIARY

Only of late have I realized that when I first joined up more than my civilian existence and my home were uprooted. Even my spiritual standards which for many years past I took for granted would seem to have lost their stability. True, I may not often have succeeded in living up to them, but I was in no doubt as to their true character. I knew that the path for me to follow was that of my spiritual convictions, that is to say, of my faith in God and the Christian principles. No matter how much I might deviate from those principles, they were there, reminding me of the gulf between them and my actual conduct. However much others might rely on purely intellectual or materialistic principles, there was no possible doubt for me as to the only road along which I personally could reach fulfilment.

Though my present belief in those principles may be as definite as ever, I no longer seem able to approach any of the many problems that confront me each day from a spiritual angle, but do so from an increasingly materialistic one. I feel that there is something fundamentally wrong in my entire attitude of the last few months, yet I seem unable to do anything about it.

Later

As an air-gunner I can never rise higher than to Flight Lieutenant and shall probably have to come down to Pilot Officer. Have I a right to disregard all considerations of promotion? Soon the royalties from my older books will cease, and since I no longer write any new ones, my only source of income outside the service will dry up completely. For some of those esoteric reasons known to the Treasury alone, my service pay up to a few weeks ago has remained that of a P.O., even though my promotion to F.O. was gazetted half a year ago and my promotion to F.L. more than three months ago. I certainly cannot afford to retain a house and housekeeper. Am I therefore entitled to shut my eyes to the question of rank and possible promotion? In my present job I seem likely to get promoted soon to S.L. Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw was quite emphatic on this point. As an air-gunner, I cut out all chances of any further advance.

There are other considerations as well that make it difficult for me to decide which is the right course. Notwithstanding my juniority, during the last few months I have been taking an active part in and exercising a certain influence upon the shaping of an important venture. Am I right to bring all these activities to an end? Even assuming that the Air Ministry will release me from my present job, would it not be my duty to apply for work for which I may have better qualifications than a younger man who, at the same time, would make a more efficient air-gunner?

XII

After days of indecision and worry I decided that the best thing for me to do would be to pay another visit to Manhill and talk it all over with the people there. Having implicit faith in Kellett's judgement, I felt that whatever his advice, it would be right. I asked the C.O. whether I might take another trip to Manhill, and in his usual kindness he gave me permission to do so. When making my request I mentioned to him that my work was decreasing from day to day and that since my job might possibly come to an early end, it didn't seem right for me to sit about doing comparatively little. He agreed, and as he did so I felt a pang. For air-gunnery would mean separation from the C.O. No matter how often I may have felt critically disposed towards him, I knew that I should never have a more sympathetic commanding officer.

The moment I arrived at Manhill I forgot all about my own problems, my recent discontent, and the purpose of my visit, and threw myself, if only as a spectator, into the life of the place. A few minutes after I arrived and greeted Harry Thwaites, perennial ironic twinkle in eye, pipe and all, and a few other friends, I was told that a small but highly important raid was planned for that night. From that moment nothing else mattered.

Once again my first visit was to the briefing room where Kellett was to

give the crews their instructions. However often I witnessed the ceremony of briefing I never failed to be fascinated by it.

The crews—about six officers and a dozen sergeants—were assembled in the room. They stood in a semicircle in front of Kellett who was speaking from behind a long table which normally was covered with charts and maps and on which the courses were plotted. Kellett, still bent and looking very frail, was leaning heavily with one hand on the huge pile of documents that he had brought with him.

‘If the weather permits,’ he began quietly, almost in a whisper, ‘you’ll go to-night to attack the aerodrome at A——.’ The young men in front of him exchanged with one another a quick glance as if of surprise. ‘It’s an easy target and we shall approach it from north-west.’ He raised a small target map and indicated on it the direction of the proposed approach. He then proceeded to explain what the nature of the attack was to be: bombing the hangars, spraying the dispersed aeroplanes with machine-guns, and, if ammunition was left, shooting up the searchlights.

I looked round me. Most of those present were youngsters in the early twenties, their rather innocent faces those of British schoolboys, nice and clean-looking, eager yet quiet, without any trace of fanaticism, slightly self-conscious but with a joke just hovering at the corners of their mouths. Judged by any but British standards, their natural and easy ways and attitudes would have seemed extremely unmilitary. Yet they were just the sort of audience to respond to a man like Kellett. He spoke not only quietly but almost casually, as a cultured Englishman might speak to a few friends in his club. A more un-German type of procedure or audience could hardly be imagined, and it suddenly struck me that it was precisely to preserve the spirit that made this type of audience and procedure possible that we were fighting.

Tactics of approach, manner of possible escape were discussed. ‘If you find you’re short of petrol and can’t reach home, try to get over to Norway,’ Kellett advised. ‘Or if you don’t mind being interned, hop across to Sweden.’

‘We shouldn’t be there long, sir,’ one of the young sergeants suggested and everyone laughed.

‘I dare say you’re right, and Sweden may soon find herself fighting on our side. Anyhow I leave it to the discretion of the captains to choose their way of escape either from Norway or Sweden. But, please, boys, don’t be foolhardy. Once you’ve dropped all your bombs, get home and don’t hang around.’ The last two words called forth another burst of laughter.

Kellett picked up his files and turned to leave the room. Everyone was pulling out cigarettes and lighting them. ‘By the way,’ Kellett stopped for a second, speaking in an even more casual tone than he had used hitherto, ‘I may be going with you to lead the action.’

The young men glanced at one another. I could have sworn that suddenly there was light in their eyes. It seemed to fill the entire room. Limping and bent, Kellett finally left.

The moment the door closed behind him there was general uproar,

and you couldn't distinguish a single word. One young sergeant came up to me and gripping my arm, said, with terrific conviction in his voice: "By God, that man has guts!" The atmosphere of the room was no longer schoolboyish.

At five I went into the crew room. The walls were covered with charts and with photographs of German ships and aeroplanes. Most of the navigators were half stretched over their tables, plotting final courses. Pilots and air-gunners were sitting about, smoking and chatting. Above a gas mask lying on a window sill was a note scribbled in pencil, 'Leave alone. I am coming back from A——. SGT. BROWNING.'

Most of the men were chewing gum and at the same time smoking. But I noticed how a cigarette barely begun would be tossed aside, only to be replaced a few seconds later by a fresh one. Officers and N.C.O.s were mixing more freely than I had ever seen them do before. There seemed not the slightest distinction between the two and they were treating one another to chewing gum, cigarettes, chocolate.

I walked up to one of the sergeant air-gunners whom I had known since the previous autumn and said jokingly, 'If you land in Sweden, don't forget to send me a pretty picture card.'

'Okay, but it'll be a rude one,' and he laughed.

A few minutes later one of the officers appeared with his Mae West tight round his chest. The compressed air in the belt created the effect of two voluminous breasts. 'I didn't know you were pregnant, Jimmy,' another pilot observed. 'Yes, and it's gone rather high up,' Jimmy replied. 'I'm told you get that way every other night.' 'Don't you be rude, only once every nine months.' 'Sorry, sir, I must have been taught wrong by my nurse.' They laughed and even Kellett who had meanwhile appeared in the room and who normally would never encourage a rude joke, joined in the general laughter. Everyone was ready to laugh at anything. If one said 'boo' they laughed; if one blew one's nose, they laughed. How else could one forget that hole in the pit of one's stomach?

Notwithstanding Kellett's words in the morning, no-one believed that he would really join the squadron. He hadn't flown since the famous action of December the 18th, and he still moved with the greatest difficulty.

The aircraft were due to warm up at six-fifteen and to take off at six-thirty. Long before six the crews in their flying kit and Mae Wests were lounging about outside the main hangar. At six Kellett arrived, not dressed for flying but wearing his ordinary raincoat and forage cap. He asked the pilots whether everything was ready and then joined Squadron Leader Harris, the captain of the leading aircraft by whose side I happened to be standing. He turned towards Harris and though he spoke in his customary muffled tones I couldn't help overhearing his words, 'Is my parachute in the cockpit?'

Was he going after all? Somehow I still couldn't believe it, but I

walked across towards the M.O. 'Don't you think,' I asked, 'it's your business to stop Kellett from going?'

'Why, surely he isn't going?'

'Well, I wonder.'

'That man isn't fit even to climb up into a machine,' the doctor replied and advanced towards Kellett. He returned after a minute. 'Didn't I tell you? Of course he isn't going.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure? You are never sure of anything with a man like Kellett; but what can I do?'

A minute or so later Kellett came up to the doctor. 'I say, Doc, do you happen to have any pills to remove pain, something like Veganin?'

'Not here, sir, but I could get some for you within a few minutes.'

'Do you mind getting me some? I should be obliged.' The doctor jumped into one of the vans waiting by the hangar and drove off.

I took my courage in both hands. 'You aren't going, sir, are you?'

Kellett laughed. I hadn't seen him laugh outright since the year before and even then only rarely. 'What makes you think I'm going? But why shouldn't I?' He laughed again. He was far brighter than I had ever known him to be. But it was the brightness of excitement, with a touch of recklessness in it and a sparkle in the eye that might almost have been fever.

I had of course no business to suggest that in his state of health it was a dangerous thing to go and that, above all, he had no right to risk his life. Every senior pilot at Manhill could lead a raid, but there weren't many who could replace him. Only a few hours previously in the mess Group Captain Windlow had said, 'I shouldn't dream of letting Kellett go; he isn't in a proper state to fly, and we can't afford to lose him.' But even the Group Captain had added, 'But what can you do with a man like Kellett? He's a law unto himself.'

The crews began mounting the ladders into their aircraft. In front of the hangar, riggers and fitters, electricians and armourers, the dozens of men who were responsible for the faultless condition of the machines, were standing about in their oil-stained blue overalls. It seemed as if all eyes were turned towards Kellett. Was he really going? No-one believed that in his present state he would risk so long and arduous a journey.

Squadron Leader Harris, who meanwhile had gone inside, emerged from the hangar, dressed for the flight with flying helmet, goggles, oxygen mask, parachute. 'It's time, sir,' he addressed Kellett in a whisper.

'One moment, Harris, I'm only waiting for the Doc.'

Just then the car with the doctor returned. 'How do I take these things?' Kellett inquired. 'You just munch them up, sir.' Kellett put two pills into his mouth and made a grimace which, however, instantly turned into a smile. But it was evident, and not to the doctor alone, that he was in pain.

Slowly he began to walk towards the nearest machine. Its propellers were already turning. Kellett stopped, took off his raincoat and cap and

handed them to me. 'You had better look after them till I return,' he said.

'Aren't you going to put on some warm flying boots, sir?'

'Oh, I'm all right, I'm wearing two pairs of thick woollen socks. I'll be all right,' he repeated. Limping heavily, he finally reached the machine and began to climb up the narrow metal ladder leading into the cockpit. His feet seemed scarcely able to find the half-dozen rungs.

DIARY

Have just returned to the mess carrying Kellett's coat and hat. I wish I weren't feeling so anxious and on edge. My natural anxiety is mingled with a purely selfish reaction. Only this afternoon at tea I had a brief talk with Kellett and he advised me to stick to my scheme and repeated his promise that as soon as I have finished my training and have been given permission by the Air Ministry, he would take me. Is fate, upon whose decisions I have been speculating all these weeks, going to use this raid on A—— to settle even my own puny problem? For if Kellett doesn't come back, is there a chance of my ever being accepted by 941?

The three planes were due to return at about 2 a.m. and I had decided to be on the aerodrome to see them land. Without undressing I went to bed at ten-thirty, but asked to be called at 1 a.m. At one-twenty I was in Ops. Room, where the C.O. was handling two telephones simultaneously, speaking to Group H.Q. and one of our satellite aerodromes. On the big centre table a sergeant observer was tracing the course of the three planes. I felt relieved when at a glance I discovered on the blackboard that so far not a single one of our machines was lost. They were all on their way home.

Long before two o'clock a distant roar could be heard over the aerodrome, and a few minutes later the watch tower 'phoned that Peter Myers's aircraft was landing—nearly an hour ahead of his E.T.A. Ten minutes later Peter came into Intelligence. He was violently sucking a cigarette, his hair was dishevelled, his eyes were red, but he was beaming.

'Did you find the target?' the Wing Commander asked.

'Yes, sir, and we've dropped all our eggs, bang in the middle of it, as a matter of fact, I think right on to the hangar.'

All the faces in the room lit up. At last a winner. Manhill had been waiting for a winner for quite a while now. Even the Wing Commander became excited. Instead of asking Peter the proper routine questions in their proper order, he took him by the shoulder and urged, 'Go on, Peter, what happened?'

'Well, sir, for once Jerry seemed to have been taken by surprise. We had some difficulty in finding A——. But just when we were beginning to despair, a Hun appeared below me flying with his navigation lights on. I figured that the bastard would be going back to his aerodrome, so I followed him and he led me straight to A——.' The entire company shook with laughter. For a moment Peter was taken aback, but after joining in for a few seconds, he continued, 'The beggars below must have thought

that I was just another Jerry and so I came down quite low. All the lights were on and they turned on the landing lights as well, and packets of Jerry buses were standing about. Before they knew what was happening we pranged them good and proper, and off we went. That was all.'

Well, if Peter wasn't going to get the D.F.C., my name was Snithers. Anyhow, it no longer mattered whether the other aircraft had found the target or not. And indeed when half an hour later Smith, the Canadian, returned and reported that he had not been able to find it, nobody minded very much.

I was determined to see Kellett land and to deliver to him his coat and cap. When soon after two there was the sound of an aeroplane I left H.Q. hurriedly and rushed to the tarmac.

The night was perfect, with a full moon in a cloudless sky and no wind. The air was mellow and warm as though it were August. In the light of the moon the hangars looked blue and fluid and their huge atramentous shadows gave the whole aerodrome the appearance of a stage setting. The red landing lights scattered at various points of the field were shining rubies against blue velvet.

I joined a fitter and an armourer who stood waiting for the landing. They too seemed under the spell of the night and even talked about the moon and the incredibly light blue sky. Behind them Peter's car was waiting with its wireless switched on, sending a tune into the night.

It was two-forty when Kellett's plane finally made its landing circuit. It circled with surprising slowness, almost laboriously, and, when it at last touched the ground, it seemed to do so reluctantly. 'I bet you they haven't dropped their bombs,' the armourer next to me observed. 'With no bombs on board the Wing Commander comes down far more dashingly.' Bombs on board meant, of course, that they had missed their target, but whereas normally this would have annoyed everyone, this time it didn't seem to matter. What mattered was that the Wing Commander had come back safely.

Yes, the bombs were on board.

The first to come down from the cockpit was Harris. 'I say, fellows, has anyone got some beer?' were his first words. Then I saw a hesitating foot on one of the rungs of the ladder, then a second foot, and slowly Kellett appeared. In the light of the many torches that were flashed on to the plane, I noticed that there was more colour in his face than there had been in it before his flight.

'What are you doing here, R.L., at this time of night?' he addressed me.

'Waiting to deliver your hat and coat, sir,' and I helped him into his raincoat.

'I do call that service—*service, monsieur*', he said, pronouncing the last two words in exaggerated schoolboy French. He was exhilarated and for the next ten minutes spoke incessantly: the concentrated searchlights over the aerodrome, situated next to the town of A—— had prevented them from identifying their target clearly and thus from dropping their bombs;

(‘Don’t drop your bombs unless you’re absolutely certain that you’ve located your target,’ he had instructed the crews during the morning’s briefing.) Yes, and the Hun really used multi-coloured searchlights; and the German A.A. fire, the flaming onions, the pom-poms, and the difficulties of finding the target; and what inadequate target maps had been provided by H.Q.!

He continued in the same vein till we reached the Intelligence Room, whence we didn’t depart till three-thirty to drive to the mess. On the table in the dining-room there were cheese, biscuits, fruit, and beer. But though some of the others fell ravenously upon the food, Kellett only nibbled at a biscuit and a miniature piece of cheese. Everybody was animated, yet no-one spoke more, joked more, laughed more than Kellett. I doubted whether anyone had ever seen him in a happier mood. For the first time in four months he had flown again and had lived the life which he obviously considered the only one worth living. It was that life which had enabled him to rise above his ailing body and the pain. He, and not I with my petty fears, had been right. Instead of aggravating his state, the raid seemed to have given him new life.

XIII

Kellett advised me to take up morse, and immediately upon my return I added it to my other occupations. Not being particularly good at memorizing things, I at first thought that I should never be able to master the new subject. But after three days the mysteries of morse began to reveal themselves more clearly, and—no doubt like every other beginner—I spent every free moment da-di-daing to myself. Having finished my course on bomb sights, I concentrated exclusively on navigation and the Browning gun. My sergeant was itching to obtain the C.O.’s permission to take me for a few days to some flying school where he could enable me to practise my knowledge in the air, but I had applied for so many favours already that, for the time being, I simply didn’t dare to ask for yet another privilege. If the Air Ministry did grant me permission to become an air-gunner, I should anyhow go through a proper course which would involve a good deal of flying and give me every opportunity to put into practice what I was learning at Sleethole. But I should have liked to see the sergeant’s wish fulfilled. Like my other instructor, he was longing to fly again, and there was so little I could do to repay them for their kindness.

The longer my course lasted the more I enjoyed my lessons. For the first time in many years I was having to put my teeth into something completely new and entirely removed from my accustomed preoccupations and interests. This meant breaking through the crust formed by habit and complacency; rejuvenation indeed. For to be young surely implies exploring new territories, mobilizing forces either seemingly non-existent or dormant, giving significance to things that formerly were meaningless, turning latent potentialities into active weapons.

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After my return from Manhill my work decreased even more and at the same time there was incessant talk of the forthcoming creation of a Polish Inspectorate General. No-one's functions at Sleethole were more likely to be swallowed up so completely by the new arrangement than mine. Even the C.O. who had rather a predilection for letting things take 'their course' seemed to have realized that there was no point in my sitting around inactively, for he announced to me one morning that he would ring up Group Captain McFaden, one of the senior R.A.F. oculists in London, to ask him to examine my eyes and decide whether I might not be passed for air-gunnery. McFaden agreed to see me the following day, and so once again I departed for London.

To my surprise the great man in London examined my eyes rather less thoroughly than any of the other R.A.F. oculists whom I had visited previously. With the exception of the test for shortsightedness, he put me through none of the light and colour practices which, I had been told, were essential to show the basic soundness of the eyes or otherwise. Since, except for slight shortsightedness, my eyes were excellent, and above the average, I felt rather disheartened after the examination.

On the following day a letter arrived from Group Captain McFaden stating briefly that my eyes were below the standard required for air crews. I had suspected that the inspection would lead to no other findings. I at once took the matter up with our station oculist, a Harley Street specialist in peace-time, who having examined my eyes twice and with far greater thoroughness, had come to much more favourable conclusions. He was quite categorical in his opinion that the test I had had in London was inadequate and also that my real eye standard was higher than appeared from the Group Captain's report. Unfortunately, all the specialists whom I consulted told me that however unsatisfactory the Air Ministry regulation regarding spectacles might be, they could pronounce judgement upon my eyes only without taking into consideration the wearing of spectacles. Yet I knew that I should never have to fly without goggles, and with special lenses in the goggles my eyes were far above the requisite standard.

XIV

May the 5rd was Poland's national holiday and work at the station was suspended. Quite rightly the Poles treated the holiday as their own affair and we took no part in it. I had, however, received an invitation from the Polish Ambassador in London to a reception on that day, and the C.O. advised me to accept it, especially since several of the prospective members of the future Inspectorate General were likely to be there. So it was decided that I should go up to London for the day, taking the nine-thirty train in the morning. (I must have spent a greater proportion of my money on railway tickets than on all my Sleethole expenses put together.)

When in the morning I arrived at H.Q. to sign the leave book I was

told that I couldn't go because a new order had just been issued according to which the duty officer must not leave the station for twenty-four hours before his duties began. I happened to be duty officer next day and thus the first victim of the new law. So I had to find another officer to take over my duties which, incidentally, would consist of nothing except being present at the station. On numerous occasions I had taken over the duties of my colleagues who wanted to spend a day in London.

Of what were generally known as the 'decent lot', the educational officers or the doctors, none was present and Wing Commander Bullard, who on several occasions had stepped in to swap duties with me, was away on leave. Only the 'old gang' were at the station and, after meeting with refusals from three of them, I came to the melancholy conclusion that the customary standards of R.A.F. behaviour had not had time to become established at Sleethole.

By ten-thirty I had given up the idea of going up to London, but just then the C.O. appeared in H.Q. 'What are you doing here, R.L., aren't you in London?' he asked. I explained the position to him, and he instantly suggested taking over duty for me. I refused to accept his offer, but he said, 'I'm doing it not so much to please you but to teach the others how to behave'. And he continued in a bitter tone, 'To imagine that at my own station I have officers who haven't yet learned the A.B.C. of Royal Air Force conduct. I hope I shall never again have to associate with such a bunch of people. And they have the cheek to wear the R.A.F. uniform and call themselves officers!' It must have been exceedingly painful to the only gentleman at the place to realize that his example had had so little effect upon the conduct of some of those under him.

XV

When I got home from London late in the evening, the C.O. was standing outside the mess ready to go home.

'I have bad news for you,' he greeted me. I knew what he meant: the authorities had turned my application down. 'It's rather disappointing,' he continued. 'After you had left I got a telephone call from the Air Ministry and was told that they had created a vacancy for you at a new course at Bentley which starts on Monday. If you couldn't get ready by Monday, they would keep a vacancy for you at the Air-Gunnery School at Sandfield, where a new course starts at the end of the month. I thought that sounded splendid. But then in the afternoon Group Captain S. from the Personnel Branch 'phoned to say that if you go on an air-gunnery course they'll have to transfer you from Administrative to General Duties branch of the R.A.F. But in order to do so they must have your medical category. So there we are, exactly where we were at the beginning. I simply don't see how we can get round the question of your medical category. With your eye standard and the existing regulations, they simply won't accept you.'

Damn my eyes! We talked for a long time, debating how to overcome

the difficulty. But none of our schemes seemed to take us any further. Even if I tried to avoid a course at a school and did my final training with 941 Squadron, as Kellett had suggested, the squadron couldn't accept me without the Air Ministry's permission, and this again would lead to the inevitable disclosure of my medical category. We finally decided that the only thing to do was to seek another interview with Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw who two months previously had promised his assistance. On the following morning I rang up Braynelaw's office where they suggested that I might call on Monday morning when the Air Vice-Marshal might have a moment to see me.

When I sat in Braynelaw's waiting-room on the Monday morning several senior officers working there were holding whispered conversations over a pile of telegrams marked 'Most Secret'. The words that most frequently reached my ears were 'German invasion of Britain', 'invading German bomber squadrons' and the like. Braynelaw's assistants were obviously preoccupied with questions of some moment, and by the time I was shown into the great man's study my personal problems seemed to have lost much of the importance that only a short while ago I had attached to them. But though I was acutely conscious of the gulf that separated them from those with which Braynelaw had to grapple, I did not feel nervous. I seemed to know that whatever might be the outcome of the interview, it would in the end prove the right thing for me.

Within less than two minutes I had explained to the A.V.-M. my medical difficulties. He asked me one or two questions and then rang for his typist, to whom he dictated the following minute to one of the highest officers of the R.A.F.:

'Will you be good enough to help me over the following matter: Flight Lieutenant R.L. who has done excellent work at Sleethole is now available and wishes to become an air-gunner. He has been working to that end in his spare time at Sleethole. He has had an inspection for eyesight and, though he has to wear spectacles, believes that his eyesight comes within the necessary category required for an air-gunner, though apparently the inspection by the eyesight experts puts him just outside that category. Both Group Captain Milder and myself are satisfied that there is some element of doubt and since there is very little deficiency, if any, in the eyesight qualifications required, would you be good enough to arrange for a special test for Flight Lieutenant R.L., in order that a very justifiable and laudable ambition should be satisfied. The point that we wish to make is that it is admitted that, without spectacles, his eyesight does not reach the necessary qualifications, but with spectacles is above the necessary category and it seems wise, therefore, to give him the benefit of the doubt and, if necessary, a special test while wearing spectacles.'

'What am I to do if I am turned down again?' I asked before taking leave.

'Let's first await the decision,' Braynelaw replied in what appeared a confident mood. My whole visit had lasted just over five minutes.

XVI

After ten days' absence General Dobry came back to settle down to serious work. He seemed to know exactly where the main weaknesses of the Polish organization lay and changes in Polish H.Q. were evidently on their way. The C.O. was in a better mood than he had been for a long time.

For the sake of the Polish airmen, who deserved a leadership that did justice to their own fine qualities of service, I was very pleased about the forthcoming reforms. Yet I did not find it easy to summon up any of the elation which the news of the changes would have evoked in me only a few months previously. I had probably suffered too much from Sleethole's least favourable aspects not to have had some of my initial enthusiasm knocked out of me. Except for my relationship with the C.O., the redeeming feature about Sleethole had been the work. So long as I had plenty of work to do, I could forget Sleethole's blemishes. But the Polish show was beginning to stand on its own feet; most of it was becoming a matter of routine, and with the arrival of General Dobry the questions of leadership and discipline—both of which were for our guests themselves to decide and about which we on our side could do little—should soon have ceased to cause difficulties. Small as my own part in the Polish venture may have been, with each day it was diminishing.

The sands of Sleethole were running low for me, and more than ever did I find myself walking through that place as a stranger. At Manhill I had made friends, some of them real friends, within a fortnight; at Sleethole in over five months I hadn't become intimate with any of my colleagues. I knew that the fault was chiefly mine, and that I was becoming more and more the victim of ideas and views of which I disapproved strongly at heart; yet I seemed unable to pull myself out from the quagmire of mental inertia and spiritual sloth. Whatever may have been the reasons, the sorry fact of a disheartening solitariness remained. Even my meals became symbolical of my position. In order to be on time for my air-gunnery lessons I was the first and only one for breakfast at seven-thirty, and I started my lunch at twelve, a quarter of an hour before the official time. I sat by myself at the long top table, which was that of the British officers, and in front of me there extended rows of tables with hundreds of plates and glasses upon them, their monotony broken only here and there by a pile of bread. Before the war a friend of mine owned a painting by Van Gogh depicting a large restaurant with rows upon rows of empty tables. For all the aesthetic pleasure which the painting conveyed, it never failed to make me feel depressed. There was an unbearable sense of loneliness from which the painter himself must have suffered. There was something equally depressing about that vast and empty dining-room in our mess, and it was undoubtedly nothing but my own sense of isolation that I projected into it. At the same time I would derive a morbid sort of enjoyment from my solitary meals. At Manhill I should have hated to have a meal by myself.

XVII

When I went home to Sussex the first time after joining up, I felt that I couldn't get away again soon enough. But the more spring intruded even into the bareness of Sleethole, the more tempting the thought of Stoughton became, and I was longing to go home if only for a few days. Though I seemed to have been away from Sleethole more than anyone else, most of my journeying had been an inevitable part of my job and even my week-ends in London usually centred round some service business. Not having had leave for several days at a stretch ever since I joined up, and in view of the decrease in my work, I finally decided to apply for Whitsun leave, and was given an extended week-end from Friday till Tuesday morning.

When I came down to breakfast at seven-thirty on Friday morning, I was told that Germany had just invaded Holland and Belgium. This was not a particularly propitious omen for a holiday in the country; but it would have needed some more personal catastrophe to deprive me of my holiday mood. For years I had believed that Germany's obvious intention was to overwhelm Europe country by country, either by threats or by actual warfare, and the only thing that might have surprised me about her latest invasion was that she should have waited so long. With Hitler's predilection for choosing either the Sabbath or other days which for most civilized people stand for peace if not actually for holiness, I might have foreseen that Whitsun would not be overlooked. But even so, by the time I reached the blossoming orchards of Kent with a blue sky above green fields and pink and white trees, I soon forgot Holland and Belgium. My holiday mood was increased by the sudden realization that I was free and independent. Once again I was master of my movements: could stop by the roadside if I wanted to, and should soon be able to wander among fields without having to keep an eye on my watch. In a few hours' time I should be able to settle down in my study with a book and read as long as I liked. It seemed incredible that less than a year ago such freedom should have formed the charter on which my life was based and that I should have thrown it away deliberately like a pair of outworn boots.

The beauty of the countryside grew with each mile. In the golden light the hills about Guildford were shining in their fresh green; the sky over the heaths of the Devil's Punch Bowl was full of birds, twittering and singing and chasing one another. But more beautiful than any of these were the downs near home, their reticence and austerity emphasizing the serenity of the day. For the last few miles I could have driven almost with my eyes shut. I knew each rise and fall of the downs, each bend in the road, each little bridge over the Ems or some other river, by now partly dried up. In front of this cottage there would be a bed of russet-coloured wallflowers; in the garden with its low flint wall, the purple irises would just be coming into full bloom; behind the next bend I should first be met

by the dark shadow of an ancient yew-tree and then by the gold moss glowing in the sun on the tiled roof of a cottage. Finally there was Stoughton, with the wide sweep of fawn-coloured downs and the deep blue of its yews.

I had brought the dogs with me, for it was more than likely that one of the first objectives of Germany's lust for spreading kultur among the degenerate British would be the conspicuous aerodrome at Sleethole. Only quite recently an English broadcast from Germany had announced smugly, 'We know quite well where the Polish Air Force is and it won't be long before we come and pay them a visit'. I should have hated to have the dogs with me at Sleethole during an air raid, and so I had decided to take them home. At first they didn't seem to recognize the place, and it took them several minutes before their hasty exploration of this or that tree trunk, hedge or wall made them realize that they had really returned to their own home.

The severe winter had wrought havoc in the garden and many of the shrubs that I had planted assiduously year by year had been killed. The carnations were gone, the strawberry bed had disappeared completely, the borders were a mass of weeds and the lawns unmown and knee-deep, but it still gave great joy to see the garden.

I spent most of the day walking through the house and the garden and admiring every detail as if I had only just been presented with them. Soon after nine I went to bed, my own comfortable bed in my own comfortable bedroom, knowing that in the morning I would be wakened by the twitter of birds and not an argument between my neighbours as to which of them should use the bathroom first, and that beyond all this there would be three full days of unalloyed bliss.

Early on Saturday morning a telegram arrived, 'Return to unit immediately'. Well, had I really expected anything else? I instantly rang up Sleethole and asked for the C.O. Yes, all officers on leave were to report at once. It wouldn't, however, matter if I returned on the following morning.

It was no good denying that some of the light had gone out. Suddenly I remembered the many war books I had read in the late twenties. Sooner or later in each one of them a passage would occur describing the blissfulness of leave and the pang of departure. No author, however unconvincing otherwise, could fail to make that passage moving. One enjoyed reading and re-reading it as one enjoyed shedding tears over the operatic heroine's suffering on the stage. But it was something different to experience that passage oneself. Living it brought none of the reward of aesthetic enjoyment, none of the contentment that warms us when we suddenly realize that our melancholy is merely a reflection of something outside ourselves, something that does not really concern us. To be the chief character in that situation brought nothing but a feeling of emptiness, almost senselessness. At Manhill I could never have dreamt of asking myself *cui bono*? Now at home that question stared me in the face and there seemed

no answer to it. What answer there was appeared to centre in the two names, Holland and Belgium, names that only twenty-four hours previously had not had the power to overshadow my own life. All of which shows that at times even war can be assessed only in terms of our particular mood. Though I had surrounded my last twenty-four hours with illusion, I should not have minded the war cutting them short if Sleethole, which stood for the immediate reality, had truly reflected that greater something symbolized by the words Holland and Belgium. If Sleethole had meant real warfare, I should gladly have thrown off the dream that Stoughton was, and no prospect of impending danger would have frightened me. But Sleethole would not offer even the recompense of danger and action. Holland or no Holland, it would mean neither the peace of Stoughton nor the elation that can accompany true hardship. It would mean frustration, and lunching in a vast and empty dining-room.

As a result of the telegram I ceased to feel at one with my home as I had done the day before. No longer was I my own master, and no longer was the world about me my own. The old sycamore in the garden, the white-washed rooms, the comfortable oak chairs, the old crucifix in the study, the hundreds of books lining the walls, the view from the window on to the down with its crest of beeches, no longer were mine. They belonged to a world at peace; I belonged to war, even if it was only a petty, distorted image of war.

By lunch-time I had partly succeeded in projecting myself back into the world of illusion and forgetting that next morning I should have to leave. But the previous day's peace was gone and, feeling restless, I decided to go for a drive to P——. It was nine months since I had last driven along that road. Because I hadn't seen the familiar sights for so long, or perhaps because I knew that I was leaving them—for good?—they naturally seemed transformed. There was beauty even about the frequent petrol pumps that at one time used to seem so hideous; and there was something equally new and arresting about the red name-board above the Woolworth shop at H—— and the Victorian 'semi-detached' villas further on.

The streets at P—— were as packed as they always used to be on a Saturday night, with country people and farm yokels doing their week's shopping, harassed mothers and lively children, sailors, soldiers, and marines walking out with girls who sent out knowing glances from under pencilled eyebrows. There was a rather greater congregation of anti-aircraft guns than I remembered to have noticed there the summer before, but the flowers in the borders along the common were even brighter than they had been in peace-time and the seagulls swept over the concrete rampart in even more graceful curves. A convoy of merchant ships guarded by a few destroyers was stealing slowly along, and the only new feature in the scene was the uncommon camouflage of the ships. But the sailors and their girls along the front were not looking at the ships but at each other; and an improvised football match between a couple of soldiers and a bevy of shrieking and red-faced girls was played with just

as much noise, abandon and not-altogether-accidental tumbling over one another as though the day were May 1939 and not 1940.

Was it just foolish sentimentality on my part that made every labourer on his way from the docks, every street corner, every shop window speak of home? No, I really belonged to them and not to the mess at Sleethole. Manhill, yes, Manhill, was home, home on the more impersonal level, appropriate to war. But Sleethole? . . . Throughout my drive back I forced myself not to think of it. Anyhow, as far as I was concerned, its days were numbered.

XVIII

As so often during recent months, I had been unfair. Even Sleethole reflected in some measure the names Holland and Belgium. I left Stoughton before 6 a.m., and when I reached the aerodrome in the course of the morning the chief purpose of the station—the training of our Polish guests—seemed to be forgotten and other considerations took the centre of the stage. Everyone talked about how the aerodrome was to be defended and what action taken in case of a German attack, especially by parachute troops. The clouds of German parachutists over Holland seemed to be darkening the horizon of Sleethole.

When I arrived at H.Q. a conference was taking place in the C.O.'s room. It was presided over by the C.O., but the chief speaker was the Brigadier who was responsible for the defences of our area. At the end of the conference it was decided that a party of Polish officers and airmen should instantly occupy Snowcamp aerodrome a few miles away, and that without delay special defence parties should be formed at Sleethole.

For the first time the Poles were given rifles and ammunition and the prospect of early action transformed even their senior officers. The former lack of discipline and co-ordination vanished completely and a refreshing unanimity and eagerness became apparent. The only ones among them who grumbled were those who had not been allocated dangerous jobs. Their one thought was how to get at the Hun, and there was no doubt that if Hitler's robots were to descend upon our territory the Poles would literally tear them to pieces.

The arrangements proposed during the morning's conference worked without a hitch. A hundred and twenty-five Polish airmen were sent out to Snowcamp, a satellite aerodrome which had been left unused since the previous autumn. When in the late afternoon I accompanied General Dobry and the C.O. there, the new quarters, occupied only a few hours previously, were spotlessly clean and everything was in readiness. The machine-guns were mounted, the rifles with their bayonets polished and shining like *objets d'art* were leaning in neat rows against the walls.

Like most born fighters and like all highly strung people, the Poles were at their best in action. Mere waiting depressed them far more than the more patient British. Ready to manifest their traditional virtue of courage, they were burning to go into action, and, in that mood, revealed

their most attractive characteristics. Everything that once had struck us as petty or irritating seemed to have fallen away. At Snowcamp each man looked smart and cheerful and the general discipline was exemplary. Some of them stood about cleaning their speckless rifles, and they did it with an abandon and affection as though the rifle were some beloved pet. Even the sadness in General Dobry's eyes gave place to a light, almost a sparkle, but he forced himself not to betray his pride by a single gesture or word. The C.O. did it for him.

XIX

Two days after my return from home the C.O. came up to me late in the evening in the mess and announced that word had come from Air Marshal D.'s office. 'The news is both good and bad,' he said, 'it depends how you take it. They are allowing you to join the new air-gunnery course at Sandfield on the 28th, but they say they won't let you do operational air-gunnery. They propose that you should finish the course at Sandfield to become eventually the gunnery officer at Nottings. I suppose this means air-gunnery instructor to the Poles. I don't imagine this is what you really want, but there it is, and it is for you to decide whether to accept the offer or not. Otherwise the Air Ministry will have to find some other job for you. You must make up your mind by to-morrow.'

Most of the night I debated with myself what answer to give. I did not dare to say no, and to annoy those at the Air Ministry who had acted so speedily and shown me so much kindness. Yet the last thing I wanted to be was an instructor, debarred from operational flying. To become an air-gunner without being permitted to do operational work was like learning to drive a car without ever being allowed to drive one. It must have been my wretched eyes—or was it my age?—that had prevented the Air Ministry from giving me an okay. It was four o'clock when I finally fell asleep without having come to any decision, but when next morning I was called at six-forty-five I knew instantly what answer to give. Of course I should accept the offer and join the course. I would go to Sandfield, and later on I might be able to wangle my way into 941 Squadron. If at some future date Kellett and Group Captain Windlow were to make a strong application on my behalf, as they had promised to do, the Air Ministry might yet consent. By the time I reached H.Q. I felt at peace with myself and with the world, and was glad that no longer should I have to trouble the C.O. with my private problems.

When I reported to the C.O. he asked me to sit down, a thing he hardly ever did in his room at H.Q. He explained that when he had gone home the previous night after our talk he had found General Dobry waiting for him. The General spoke to him of the new Polish Inspectorate General which was being formed in this country and of which Dobry was earmarked as the head. The C.O. himself would probably become a sort of chief liaison officer between General Dobry and the British authorities. In

the course of the conversation the General mentioned that it would be necessary to have an interpreter and confidential assistant between himself and the C.O., and he named me as the person whom he had in mind for that post. The C.O. had accepted the General's suggestion. He summed up his account with the question, 'What do you think of it, will you accept it?'

The proposal was so unexpected that for a moment or two my mind seemed unable to function. After a while I asked the C.O. whether I might return to my room to think it over. When I got back there the only problem that seemed to me of real interest was, why did fate do this, what was the meaning behind it all? Why hadn't Dobry spoken a few hours sooner and before I had made up my mind about Sandfield? Once again, there was uncertainty and indecision, like a sudden darkness. If the door to operational air-gunnery had really been shut by the Air Ministry, would it not be wiser to remain with the C.O., to continue with the Polish venture, to work for the two men for both of whom I felt respect and something like affection?

Before I had had time to clarify my thoughts, the C.O. entered my room. Realizing how difficult it would be for me to come to a decision, he advised me to call on General Dobry and talk the whole matter over with him. But he warned me that the Air Ministry must be informed about our decision before noon: there were numerous candidates for the one vacancy at Sandfield and the time was getting very short.

Without further delay I walked across the camp to the C.O.'s house where the General was staying. He received me as though he had been expecting me, and his kindness encouraged me to be more candid than I had originally intended. I felt, however, that I had both an excuse and a right to be frank: if I was to leave the Polish venture for good, whatever I might say would be of little consequence to myself while it might possibly be of some assistance to the General; if, on the other hand, I was to ally myself more closely to him, then it was my duty to inform him precisely of my own views. In reply, the General remarked that most of what I had told him was known to him already and that drastic changes were to be expected in the organization of the Polish air units in Britain. Provided that Group Captain Milder wanted me to remain with him, he, General Dobry, would be very pleased if I cared to accept the job. I thanked him and promised to reply in the course of the day.

On my return to H.Q. I reported to the C.O. 'Quite frankly, R.L.,' he said, 'I strongly advise you to accept the General's invitation. I really think this is the most suitable job for you. But I am also sure that it would be advisable if you went away from Sleethole for a short while now and joined the course at Sandfield. Once the Inspectorate General is formed we'll send for you. After all, even in your new job your expert knowledge of latest air-gunnery methods will be most useful, and in sending you on the course we are not deceiving the Air Ministry.'

Evidently fate had taken all power of decision out of my hands and was using me as a pawn on her chessboard. It was best not to put up any

opposition, and let things take their course. Anyhow, I was far too bewildered to know my own mind.

I remained in the C.O.'s room while he rang up the Ministry to say that he would be sending me to Sandfield, not with a view to employing me at Nottings, but for other future duties. The Air Ministry replied that they would 'phone back later.

Just when I was sitting down to tea in the mess the C.O. rang me up announcing that a signal had just arrived from London, but that he couldn't make it out. Would I come to see him straight away? When I arrived at his house, he showed me the message which had come through distorted: though it spoke of my being accepted for Sandfield, it also said many other things that made no sense. Once again the C.O. rang up London. Yes, I might start on the course; in view of the strong case I had made out for operational employment and the recommendation from one of the most senior officers in the R.A.F., the veto against such employment had been dropped for the moment, but whether I would eventually be used for combat duties could only be decided later on, when the question of my eyes might possibly be reconsidered. I must report at Sandfield by Saturday, and make an immediate application for special goggles.

XX

So at last Sleethole was receding into the past! On my last evening the weather was better than it had been for five or six months. The few tulips were aflame in the borders in front of the mess; behind them there were some dark mauve irises, and behind them again the lawn, gradually merging into fields. The evening sky was all liquid gold and subdued pink and silky blue.

The war news got grimmer with every hour. After the complete conquest of Holland and Belgium, the French front seemed to be cracking. When at nine the wireless broadcast the moving speech of Queen Wilhelmina of Holland and subsequently reported the complete defeat of the Dutch army and our own large air losses, the anteroom sat in a silence that was the more impressive for the grim and determined faces of all those present. It was an appropriate moment for anyone to set out upon a career whose final aim and purpose was to fight.

Once I realized that I was leaving I felt the customary pang that always seemed to come before final separation. For I felt, nay, knew, that never again should I return to Sleethole. Whatever General Dobry and the C.O. might decide on my behalf, I knew that this was my last evening there. In consequence, I suddenly began to see the place with new eyes, noticing as for the first time how widely the horizon stretched above the aerodrome, noticing the cows and sheep grazing in a near-by field and the silver indication of the Thames in the furthest distance. My thoughts turned to my miserable little room at H.Q., with its perpetual coal dust covering the table and every book and file; with its protecting wire netting

over the small window; its primitive iron stove whose base was lost in a heap of clinkers and ashes; its broken telephone instrument that somehow the adjutant could never find time to have mended; the huge volume of King's Regulations; in a corner the enormous case of chocolates, sweets, cigarettes, and woollies, gifts that I had collected among friends and had intended to distribute among the troops on some appropriate occasion. Who would do it after I have gone? On the rickety arm-chair Barthé used to lie sleepily throughout the morning, while Billfox would lie by my feet or, in warmer weather, near the door to enjoy the draught. Yes, the dogs had been my one link with a world at peace.

Once again the night brought little sleep. After the beautiful evening a violent storm broke, and it may have been merely the plaint of the squeaking windows and the howling wind outside that kept me awake. But in the restlessness of the night old questions began to nag at me again. Should I be able to repress the coward within me and overcome the many new difficulties and dangers? I had chosen what was taken to be the most dangerous job in the R.A.F.—the night before we had lost thirty-five aircraft over Belgium alone. Was it foolhardiness and misplaced ambition that were driving me towards this final step? No longer would patience be the virtue I should be most in need of—if would be courage.

I left Sleethole at 3 p.m. Somehow the news of my departure had spread, and my colleagues approached me in what seemed to me a new spirit. According to their earlier gossip I was attached to the C.O. and did everything for him in order to get all the plums that Sleethole had to offer and promotion into the bargain. And since no secrets could be kept at Sleethole, even the news of General Dobry's most recent offer had already made the usual round. 'All this talk of air-gunnery is mere eyewash; he's after something quite different!' That had been yesterday's common talk. Suddenly they heard that I was really giving up what they regarded as the best and cushiest job at the station and was throwing away the early promotion that would have come automatically with the new appointment at the Inspectorate General, exchanging both for a less easy job and stepping down two ranks from F.L. to P.O. They seemed shy when they bade me good-bye and evidently did not know what to say. And the less they said, the sadder I felt. For all its beastliness, Sleethole had been my home and my work for nearly half a year.

When I was ready and my little car, piled high with luggage, was at last standing outside H.Q., I went into the C.O.'s room.

'We won't exchange any of the sentimental things that one says on such occasions,' he greeted me. 'I think we know one another too well for that.'

I said nothing. We shook hands; I saluted and walked out.

When I got into my car, he came out of H.Q., hatless, and I thought he was going across to Polish H.Q., but he waited until I had got my car started and then raised his hand. I saluted again, and again could say nothing.

Book Three

THE PROUD WING

Chapter One

MOUNTING DEMONS

I

DIARY

Am spending a day and night in London, and have paid two visits already to the optician who will furnish me with my special flying goggles and who seems to be setting about this momentous job in a truly scientific manner.

Dined last night with one friend and lunched to-day with another. They both asked me the same question, 'Are you volunteering for air-gunnery because you are sick of life?' This was the melodramatic formula in which inveterate civilians expressed their reaction to a decision that, at any rate to myself, appears in keeping with the rapidly accelerating momentum of the war. My friends still view the war as sufficiently remote from their own as yet fairly placid lives to be practically unrelated to these. How was I to explain my decision to them? I am not in the least sick of life, and there is a great deal I still hope to do. But I am also conscious of an inner urge stronger than any desire for this or that achievement after the war. The turn which events have taken during the last few days would appear to indicate that it isn't merely my own will that is responsible for that urge. For many months I have been trying to force the hand of fate; when I was about to cease making further efforts and was offered an unexpected job, fate decided for me. To me this intervention on the part of fate is a very real thing. But it is difficult to make use of so irrational an argument in conversation with others. There was nothing I could say in reply to my friends' question.

II

I left London in the early morning by car and reached Sandfield soon after lunch. Sandfield was a new station, handsomely laid out among pleasant fields and with wooded hills in the distance. Its buildings showed the good proportions and the attractive style that had become common to all recent R.A.F. architecture.

Immediately upon my arrival I was told that the course would last four weeks only and that new-baked air-gunners were being sent straight from

Sandfield to operational squadrons in France. Four weeks! And Kellett had told me that after finishing my ground training at Sleethole and a month's course at an air-gunnery school, he would have to give me at least another month's training with the squadron at Manhill.

All the newcomers arrived together by charabanc. With one exception, they were civilians, and few of them had ever seen a machine-gun or flown in an aeroplane. Their ages varied from the mid-twenties to the early thirties. Their looks and bearing were extremely unmilitary, and suggested commercial travelling, mechanics, or any other civilian profession rather than the Air Force. Quite frankly, I felt disappointed at first. In my imagination I had identified air-gunnery with operational air-gunners and with Manhill, and had anticipated that I would find myself at Sandfield in a corresponding milieu. I had overlooked the fact that no training centre was likely to possess either the spirit or the men that an operational station alone could produce.

Among the newcomers was a young South American who had recently become a British citizen. Like everyone else he had arrived in mufti; but unlike anyone else he was smoking a very large and very expensive-looking cigar. By tea-time he appeared in his new uniform which bore the mark of having come from some exclusive sanctum in Savile Row. Having noticed that I was an 'old' officer, he came up to me after tea and asked whether we might go for a walk round the camp. I assented gladly, having guessed what the true purpose of the request was, and indeed the poor man bombarded me with a barrage of questions about saluting, the mess, and a hundred other R.A.F. matters. What do you call the 'long bit' of an aircraft and all its other parts? What happens in a hangar? Do we build the aircraft at the station? How do you address a batman? Do we tip our instructors? Does one invite the C.O. out to dinner? He was evidently more at home in Mayfair and on the French Riviera than in an R.A.F. station, but he seemed genuinely eager to exchange his former habits for more austere ones and to make a success of that change. Our walk reminded me of my first day in the R.A.F. and I realized how much less courageous I had been in my attempts at garnering service knowledge. After we had finished our walk Del Rios offered me one of his large cigars. I declined. In reply he gripped my arm and exclaimed with what could only be described as Latin passion, 'You must have one. You cannot refuse. I should be terribly, terribly offended.' He only let go when I assured him that I never smoked cigars and that if I tried to do so I should in all probability be sick.

III

Our first working day was exactly the sort of 'first day' that I had read about in popular articles. In the morning, the forty civilians in their brand-new uniforms appeared in front of the mess, trying to hide their self-consciousness behind a show of forced hilarity. At nine o'clock we

marched off to a lecture room where an F.L. gave us a talk on general Air Force matters. The fact that his audience contained a fellow F.L. seemed to have a disconcerting effect upon him. (When on my arrival I inquired whether I should replace my former F.L.'s rings by the solitary one of a P.O. I was told that since after my course at Sandfield I should presumably become a F.L. again, there was no need to make the change, even though my pay was that of a P.O.) The lecturer who was some ten years my junior, evidently felt self-conscious when giving the new class such startling instructions as, 'You salute with the right hand and without taking off your cap' or 'You address a senior officer as sir.' I felt sorry for him, for I knew how uncomfortable I should have felt had our roles been reversed. It was all very well to lecture on R.A.F. trivialities to Poles who were completely ignorant of our ways, but it was a different thing to do so in front of a colleague. So I sat throughout the lecture with as serious a face as I could muster, and carefully refrained from catching the lecturer's eye. I was certain that had I done so, either he would have blushed or we should both have laughed.

We were divided up into four squads, each with its own squad commander. On the suggestion of the G.O., who probably felt that it wouldn't do to let an 'old' R.A.F. officer with the rank of an F.L. take his orders from a P.O. who had only just joined the service, I was made commander of one of the squads.

After the morning lecture we were marched off to the equipment section to collect all the paraphernalia for our work: overalls, goggles, flying suit, manuals, etc. The lavish way in which flying personnel was equipped always filled me with a feeling of respectful amazement. At Sandfield I was given a flying suit with a fur collar and a loose fur lining reaching to my feet, flying boots lined with sheepskin, long white silk gloves to be worn under the padded leather gloves, and numerous gadgets for R.T., intercom., oxygen, etc. On top of all this, I had ordered in London my special goggles which were to cost some twelve guineas.

After having had our fill at the equipment section we were marched off to the station photographer where we formed ourselves into one of those manly groups whose portraits in cricket, rowing, or any other kind of sports attire constitute the more treasured possessions of the majority of self-respecting Englishmen.

Although the pressure of the war seemed to be increasing with every hour and though our course had been reduced to one month only, Sandfield evidently refused to live in accordance with any other rhythm than that typical of most British educational efforts in the leisurely days of peace—that expressed in such slogans as 'make yourself at home first', 'don't be too serious', 'no gentleman ever hurries'. Though everyone on the course was aching to 'get down to it', we were given a free afternoon, and the whole station assumed the character of a country club in peacetime. Some of the newcomers demonstrated their prowess on the tennis courts in front of the mess, others sat about in easy chairs on the lawn, others strolled up and down in the newly made mess garden.

None of the R.A.F. stations where I had previously served was situated in more rural surroundings. The moment you stepped out through the gate you found yourself walking along winding country lanes; you passed old cottages and cottage gardens gay with flowers; you wandered among grazing fields, or climbed wooded hills. I instantly fell under the spell of the scenery and gratefully inhaled the country atmosphere. Yet in spite of this, I found it hard to control my impatience. News from France was becoming more and more alarming and it was no longer possible to regard one's presence in the R.A.F. as only vaguely related to the war as a whole. It had struck me that, except on rare occasions, the war itself seemed to have little power to obtrude upon life in an aerodrome. Even at Manhill and Morley it was not the war but some particular raid or individual task that controlled daily life. But the bearing of that task upon the war in general might be almost incidental. Sandfield, however, resounded with accounts of the fate that had befallen our predecessors on the course, and the reality of war was brought pretty close to us. For the last lot of Sandfield air-gunners had hardly finished their course when they had been dispatched to Holland and France, and many of them had already been killed. Not unnaturally, therefore, we were longing to be up and doing.

IV

On the afternoon of our third day the work started in earnest. Once we got down to it, I realized that my time would be fully occupied. For to be a member of a small group of forty and the leader of a crew of ten, seemed to make greater demands upon my time than had the preoccupation with several thousand Poles. Already at Morley I had discovered that the smaller the number of people you have to look after the busier you are.

Our first working day began at seven o'clock on the parade ground. It was my first experience of proper drill under a sergeant-major or, rather, a warrant officer. For my forty companions the occasion was even more unique, and they faced it either with an excess of zeal or with an attempt to turn it into a joke. Though it was the jokers who later on would have to pay for their flippancy, it was the keen ones who made it difficult for me, and presumably everyone else, to keep a straight face. Their stern-featured abandon turned the slow march into a peregrination of stuffed geese, and when difficulties over certain words of command arose, they pulled out scraps of paper and covered them with copious notes about such things as standing easy or right wheel.

Our morning effort to emulate the Guards was followed by yet another introductory lecture. This time the lecturer was a portly Flight Lieutenant of fairly ancient vintage. He began by dishing up some of those more flagrant banalities that make even the most enthusiastic R.A.F. aspirant feel hot and cold by turns. 'It is an unsurpassable privilege to belong to the R.A.F.', his rancid words fell upon our defenceless ears. 'Our motto is each for all and all for each'; 'from now on your moves are watched by the whole Empire'. After this promising beginning he pro-

ceeded to embark upon waters which were evidently unfamiliar to him. Though my forty colleagues squirmed under his patronizing tone—he spoke as though we were a lot of schoolchildren who had never before heard anything about a service called the Royal Air Force—my own suffering was even more acute. I couldn't help blushing inwardly for the lecturer, especially as he concentrated on a subject in which I happened to be fairly well versed and which apparently represented an unexplored jungle to him. He spoke of the various commands into which the R.A.F. was divided and of the different heads and sub-heads of those commands. He could not avoid mentioning the names of many of the men for whose benefit I had written such copious memoranda at Sleethole. He insisted upon confusing them, their titles and their functions and, in an attempt to impress his listeners, referred to them as though they were supermen dwelling on some distant planet. After the trial had come to an end, I refrained from enlightening my colleagues on even the most blatant fallacies to which they had been treated and which they had conscientiously immortalized in their brand-new copybooks. If I wanted to make enemies at Sandfield, there would probably be other opportunities to do so. Anyhow, the future efficiency of my fellow air-gunners was not likely to suffer even if their views on the functions of this or that Air Chief Marshal were not of a very precise nature.

It was only in the afternoon that the real job of preparing ourselves for the war began in earnest. At first the intricacies of the new job appeared to frighten my colleagues, who, of course, had not shared my advantage of earlier instruction. Yet the few months that had elapsed since I had last studied the workings of the particular gun were sufficient to have made me forget a great deal about them. In consequence I had little excuse to sit back and pretend that I knew everything already, and had to work as hard as everyone else. By the end of the day I felt dead tired and went to bed as soon as dinner was over. Once in bed, I mumbled my little prayer of thanks for the amount of work during the day, for my immensely satisfying sense of tiredness, for Sandfield in general, and especially for the effective assistance of Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw. Life was certainly a wonderful adventure.

V

While we had been having our first drill on Monday the icy wind of the early morning seemed to go right through my bones, and during the subsequent lecture in the unheated classroom I began to feel shivery. By the evening I had a temperature of over a hundred, and on the following morning I hardly managed to get out of bed. I tried to carry on, but by lunch-time had to give up, hoping to shake off the cold by next morning. But when I was called at six in the morning, the cold was even more violent and I had to remain in bed. Seldom had an illness annoyed me more. I was losing precious time and, as our syllabus was very full and our course very short, every hour counted. Wasn't it just like life? Though at

Sleethole there had been many days during which I had practically nothing to do, I had achieved the distinction of being the only officer at the station who hadn't been prevented by ill health from attending his work for a single day. At Sandfield, where the time factor was of such importance, I fell ill almost as soon as I had arrived. I tried to do some work in bed, but my brain didn't seem able to absorb much. As the oldest member of our squad and the senior officer of the entire course I naturally was determined to be on top, at any rate of my own squad. Yet however great my advantage over my colleagues might have been, it didn't take me long to realize that it would not be easy to achieve my ambition. Most of the members of the course were very keen and many of them came from the motor or engineering trades. Such mysteries as hydraulic systems, deflection angles, and generators had constituted their daily fare and their new calling did not offer them many problems.

The only one for whom I felt really sorry was little Del Rios. In his smart uniform and elegant shoes, with his small and narrow feet and his hands with tapering fingers and long nails, he stood out conspicuously from the somewhat rough-looking Number Four squad. His jet black hair, large dark eyes and olive skin, not to mention the inevitable cigar in his mouth, gave him the appearance of a character in a film rather than that of a budding air-gunner in the R.A.F. Though his record for shooting grouse and pheasants was said to be impressive, he knew nothing about machine-guns, ballistics, aviation, or service matters in general. Why should he have volunteered, I wondered. He was young, rich and, judging by his daily long-distance calls to his wife, happily married, and he held no strong views on politics or the war. But from the very first moment he worked hard and with real passion, and I assumed that it was the spirit of adventure or some inner restlessness that had finally brought him to Sandfield.

Del Rios was not the only member of my squad whom I found it hard at first to visualize as an air-gunner to be sent to France, possibly after three or four weeks' training. Several of my colleagues in our squad had told me that until they went to their medical exam. in London, they had never dreamt of becoming air-gunners. For most of them their peace-time jobs had come to an end; they knew that sooner or later they would be called up, so they thought they might as well volunteer and get commissions as soon as possible. One of them had joined because his fiancée had insisted upon it; and all of them admitted that they had regarded being in the Raff a 'swell thing'. A former dirt-track racing driver told me that he had always considered the R.A.F. uniform the smartest of the lot, and the one that would suit him best. Since there had been vacancies for officer air-gunners, an air-gunner he had become. There had been nothing dramatic in the decisions of my new friends, nothing long premeditated. None of them seemed to have gone through long inner deliberations and heart-searchings as I had done. Yet in spite of that difference, or perhaps because of it, I soon began to suspect that they would prove more efficient in our new vocation than I.

VI

Surprisingly my influenza helped me to make a friend. For the first time since I had joined up, I had to share my bedroom with another man. Though I didn't much mind this, the legitimate owner of the room most certainly did. He gave unmistakable indications of his feelings in a reticence that was as little different from open antagonism as made no difference. He was in his early twenties, a pilot, and he treated me with that air of condescending indifference with which every flying man regarded all the frauds who, whilst performing only 'special and administrative duties', nevertheless wore the same uniform and shared the privileges and the distinctions of belonging to the R.A.F. I sympathized with his attitude, for when in the company of even the youngest pilot, navigator, or air-gunner, I always regarded myself, in Braynelaw's wise phrase, as a 'Woolworth airman'.

Like so many of our young pilots, my room-mate was tall, fair-haired, and altogether representative of a type of whose existence most of us were scarcely conscious before the war. Or was it that the R.A.F. had developed that type and made it predominantly its own? Ever since I had joined the service I had seemed to encounter those tall, fair-haired youths. When first spoken to, they often appeared surprisingly shy, but would soon reveal a hard-boiled cynicism. On closer study their cynicism seldom proved more than skin-deep, and I believe that a good deal of it was due to the American films, to which they were passionately addicted and whose cynical flying heroes they half-consciously tried to emulate. Those who might have been driven into a more genuinely cynical attitude by the hopelessness of the political situation before the war represented only a small minority. For only the more intellectually minded Englishman of twenty tended to ponder very seriously over the wider issues of national life, and you were not likely to meet him outside the universities. Few of the young R.A.F. men however had come straight from the centres of learning, most of them having been clerks, mechanics, or members of any of the innumerable trades in which the younger members of the middle and lower middle classes earn their living. Yet if you learned to know them intimately, you found that usually there was some serious strain in them which, however, was the last thing they would reveal to the eyes of their R.A.F. colleagues. What was common to them all was an outstanding courage, the more impressive for being utterly undemonstrative. Their disregard of danger and even of death was so profound that they themselves were the last to recognize it for what it really was; and the braver they were the greater was their contempt for all display of heroics. They were intensely patriotic, at any rate in the early days of the war when I used to mix with them, but in an almost secretive and extremely matter-of-fact way, and the one word you would never hear them use was patriotism. Except for the moments when they had to look danger straight in the face and may possibly have felt scared, they loved and enjoyed every

moment of their flying adventure which was 'tremendous fun', greater fun in fact than anything they had experienced before the war or were likely to experience after it had ended. Not that they were given to much brooding over so distant a future. This they might do later, when the war has settled down into its second, third, or, possibly, fourth year. In 1939 and 1940 everything about it was still a novelty; they hadn't had time for retrospect and lived exclusively in the present. And the present was 'wizard'. In actual fact, every one of them was a hero. But they were heroes of an entirely new kind, despising self-dramatization of any sort and suspicious of all expressions of admiration to which their performances might prompt others. This does not mean that they themselves refused to talk about their exploits. Far from it. But they spoke of them as they might speak of someone else's achievements on the football field. Moreover, they never referred to them in terms of the wider issues that formed the true background to their deeds but merely in the far more unromantic ones of technicalities. It wasn't what they themselves had accomplished that they would narrate at great length but how one of the engines had suddenly cut out, how Jerry had tried to do this or that, how they had hardly managed to get out of a spin, how at the critical moment those bastard guns had jammed. Through the use of technicalities like these, they would camouflage all that was most personal, most heroic in their performance. It was as if even in their talk the machine had to serve them as a sort of lightning conductor for everything that in some mysterious way they were either afraid or ashamed of—their innermost human core, their true emotions, and their spiritual reactions to the terrific impact of their adventures. And in this, as in so much else—their boyishness and love of practical joking, their genius for understatement, their ability to absorb unlimited quantities of beer, their convincing yet only half-articulate way of expressing themselves, their self-understood respect for the rules of the 'game'—they were intensely and exclusively British.

Whereas neither the Navy nor the Army was ever symbolized for me by that particular type, my inner picture of the R.A.F. was invariably associated with that fair-haired boyish generation. Was it that the R.A.F. attracted a particular physical type? It will be an interesting task one day, for psychology to determine whether certain professions attract not merely certain mental types but even physical.

To return to my room-mate, for the first three days I saw very little of him. When I got up and dressed in the morning he was still asleep; at night I retired to bed early, several hours before his return from a visit to the 'flicks' in a near-by town or the 'local' just outside the aerodrome. But on the second evening of my illness he came into our room straight from dinner to do some work. I did my best to bury my sneezing presence under my blankets and kept as quiet as I possibly could. But somehow we began to talk and he told me that a brother of his was sergeant pilot in a Wellington squadron not far from Manhill. Then I spoke of my days at Manhill and of my hopes of joining 941 Squadron. The name of Manhill and the subject of operational work not merely

broke the ice but instantly washed every remnant of it away, and when by midnight we exchanged the fifth and final good night, we both did it as though we had known one another all our lives.

VII

The day on which I rejoined my squad was our first flying day. Though I was still feeling shaky I was compensated by a childish sense of superiority over my colleagues, a sense that I regarded as the legitimate prize for the great trepidations and small victories that had been mine in the course of my flying experiences at Manhill and Bentley. For most of my colleagues flying and all its paraphernalia were strange and unfamiliar, and the collection of harnesses, parachutes, and lifebelts was an exciting adventure. Later on in the crew room, the pale faces, perspiring foreheads, twitching lips, betrayed the nervous tension that the new experience had produced in the novices. I had been more fortunate than they. In my privileged position at Manhill I had been able to keep all my fears to myself and nurse them in secret without having to exhibit their outer manifestations to a dozen colleagues in the crew room.

One of my fellow air-gunners confessed that he had never yet travelled by air or sea without being violently sick. I felt genuinely sorry for him, for sickness added to the sensation of fear that the novelty of flying so often arouses must have been almost beyond endurance. Two members of the course, one of them a former actor, the other a famous motor-racing driver, had with a few deft touches given themselves the appearance of flying aces in a Hollywood film. Long before they were due to go up on their first flight, they were walking about the aerodrome dressed in their flying suits and helmets, their goggles dangling nonchalantly from their wrists, and handkerchiefs of bright yellow silk tied picturesquely round their necks. I saw them again soon after their first landing. They were both lying flat on two tables in the crew room. Their faces had a greenish look, their eyes were tightly shut, they hardly seemed to breathe. The yellow bits of silk were lying crumpled and dirty on the dusty floor.

I went up three times in the course of the day. In spite of the forty or so flying hours in my log book I found my first flight at Sandfield a somewhat alarming experience. The aircraft in which we received our initial air-firing instructions were called Demons. Now, whatever vision that name may evoke, it will certainly not be of a rickety, antediluvian biplane that had the knack of becoming unserviceable after almost every flight and whose air-gunner's cockpit—added to it years after the plane had been discarded for actual operations—suggested nothing so much as a death-trap. Getting into the cockpit was rather like mounting a refractory horse. The seat inside the cockpit served also as the step, but as you placed your foot on it, more often than not it would turn turtle, dragging you down with it or collapsing altogether. Once inside the cockpit, you soon

discovered that that foliosome seat was a hindrance rather than an aid to firing, and you tried to dispense with it, preferring to stand on the square foot of rickety floor underneath. Yet since the floor appeared to be first cousin to the seat, even that method had its drawbacks, for in order to manipulate your gun in a standing position you had to be on tiptoe all the time. This by no means improved the quality of your firing, especially as the floor underneath performed its own convolutions independent of those of the aircraft. On one occasion this sorry bit of floor under my feet suddenly disappeared altogether, without, however, being able to drag me down with it through ten thousand feet of space. I was solidly strapped in the cockpit, and anyhow, the temperamental floor space could certainly not accommodate the giant to whose proportions I had grown by the addition of a flying suit, harness, and Mae West. But Demon's air-gunner cockpit—gun-turret would be too pretentious a name for that sorry rostrum—revealed additional features that justified my apprehensions on that first day. It was completely unprotected and you sat all the time right in the full blast of the slipstream. I had imprudently left loose the ends of the woollen scarf round my neck, and the moment I raised myself to place my magazine in position, the slipstream beat those ends into my face with a violence that for a moment fairly stunned me. Before I was able to collect myself, it pulled the whole scarf off my neck, and in less time than you could have said the proverbial 'knife', my handsome blue scarf, knitted by a kindly lady, was entangled in the fuselage, and fluttered, not precisely like a banner but like some weird serpent. But even this lasted only for a couple of seconds, for finally the wind whipped the scarf off Demon altogether and caused it to disappear somewhere between heaven and earth.

Demon was indeed a terrifying being, and though in time I developed for it some of the affection that we all feel for the tools that help us to acquire new knowledge, I seldom felt quite at home in my cockpit, and my enjoyment of flying was never free from anxiety.

During that very first flight the misbehaviour of a perpetually falling seat and the difficulties caused by a turret mechanism that worked only in occasional jerks, were augmented by the antics of the hydraulic system. These took the form of spouting oil that, coming from a leak in one of the flexible pipes, covered my new flying suit which was having its first experience of the air.

Half an hour after I had landed I went up again to fire at a drogue. We flew out towards the range by the sea and circled there for some twenty minutes, but the plane with the drogue never turned up. After tea I went up for a third time. The drogue really did appear and the firing of the first hundred rounds proved a most enjoyable experience, but my second magazine jammed before I had fired a single shot and I had to give up all further efforts. Thanks to Demon's peculiar physique, it was impossible to communicate with the pilot, and I could not inform him of my ballistic impotence. Thus I had to watch him as he patiently continued his prescribed circuits, the towing plane flying alongside with a beautiful steady-

ness such as I had never experienced in the past nor was likely to benefit from in the future.

By the end of the day I felt physically exhausted—I still had a slight temperature and a sore throat—but mentally elated. In spite of Demon's alarming behaviour, the flying itself had been as exhilarating as ever. My tiredness was not of the kind to keep me awake for hours, as so often at Sleethole, and I went to sleep a few minutes after I had gone to bed.

VIII

To be the head of my little squad of ten proved to be not only an interesting but in one particular aspect a surprisingly revealing experience. For more than anything else, it showed me how far I had travelled since I had first given up civilian life. The measuring rod was provided by my own reaction to the initial difficulties within the squad. While those difficulties were inevitable, my reaction was not, and it surprised me greatly. Most of the little frictions in the squad arose from lack of discipline which, in turn, was the outcome of the civilian attitude of my charges. Their failings, which in civilian life might have been of little consequence, were a serious handicap in a service existence. The young men had never had a day's military training; some of them were unpunctual, casual; some regarded their daily duties with the nonchalance with which they might have treated some minor job during a week-end visit to friends; some regarded saluting as absurd and embellished their uniform with civilian frills, trying to wear a carnation as a buttonhole or appearing on parade in cream-coloured gloves. They had a high opinion of air-gunnery in general, but seemed unable to shake off a somewhat contemptuous attitude towards individual branches of their new calling. They inclined to treat these as they might a new hobby, keen so long as the subject was entertaining, but casual whenever its more difficult or less pleasurable aspects had to be surmounted.

Less than a year earlier I might have behaved exactly as they did; but within that short time I had developed an attitude that made their essentially civilian methods grate on my nerves. Had my colleagues of the preceding months at Sleethole been professional airmen, showing the virtues normally associated with service life—keenness, order, comradeship, punctuality, respect for precedent—my former individualism and a mild sense of contrariness might possibly have driven me to cling to my civilian ways. But, as things were, the very opposite had happened and, quite unconsciously, I had cultivated the ways and methods of the R.A.F. and developed a service attitude that within eight months appeared to have become second nature. Thus at Sandfield I recognized, not without amusement, that I had turned into a disciplinarian. Two of the members of my squad complained to the C.O. that I was 'too severe' and that, being officers, they resented my 'sergeant-major methods'. The C.O. passed on the complaint to me, but at the same time set my mind at ease by

adding that he regarded it as a compliment and asked me to carry on as before.

By far the most attractive person in the squad was Corporal Miller, who was in charge of our training. Although occasionally this or that officer would treat us to a special lecture, we received the bulk of our instruction from Corporal Miller. Except on flying days, we assembled in his classroom at eight in the morning and would remain there throughout most of the day. Even on the firing ranges it was he who guided us. Tall, lanky, loosely knit, just under thirty, Corporal Miller—it must have been due to one of those mysteries governing service promotion that he wasn't a sergeant or more—was the most unruffled instructor I had ever met. He knew his air-gunnery inside out, yet you would not have described him as particularly brainy or in any other way outstanding. He was intensely British and typical of the class to which he belonged, which meant that he was a real expert at his job, at the same time treating his knowledge in an impersonal sort of way, never quite without a touch of irony. Altogether his sound common sense had a nice admixture of humour, and he was no respecter of persons, approaching everybody from a Wing Commander to one of his own pupils with the same courtesy and a smile, the meaning of which was not altogether obvious. (This may have been the reason for his failure to induce his superiors to recommend him for promotion.) The mysteries of the reflector sight, of the hydraulic system, or of a new electric gun turret were all treated and explained as if they were the simplest things in the world.

Though personally I could never claim any particular aptitude for mechanical problems, the stubborn dumbness of one or two of my colleagues would arouse homicidal tendencies even in me. Corporal Miller, his hands in his trouser pockets, his narrow shoulders looking even narrower in his ill-fitting tunic, would merely look at his bright pupil, and nothing but the faintest quiver at the corner of his lips would betray that his reaction to human stupidity was that of amused indulgence, just as mine was that of irritation. Which only showed how superior he was to me.

Had I possessed Corporal Miller's wisdom I should probably have found my squad less of a trial during the first week or so. Yet in reality only a few of its members were troublesome, most of them being very easy to get on with. Pride of place was taken by a middle-aged man who had been in the R.A.F. before and had only just returned to it. Then came Del Rios, carrying with him wherever he went the spiritual atmosphere of the French Riviera and the physical one of his expensive cigars. Because he found air-gunnery extraordinarily hard to master, he put his back into it with a determination that showed a truly Latin passion, often accompanied, as it was, by juicy Spanish invectives which never failed to make everyone, Corporal Miller included, roar with laughter. Next in the scale of virtue was McDonald who had once run a 'leading motor showroom in the West End' where he sold motor cars to 'film stars'. He was

our star turn whenever questions of hydraulics or of conversion of kinetic energy into mechanical energy arose. He too soon acknowledged that civilian habits simply could not be carried over into the service. Rudfort, unimaginative, heavy, red-faced, but working as hard at Sandfield as he had done on his farm in Yorkshire which he had only just left to volunteer for the R.A.F., he too was on the right side of the squad.

The next five men, an engineer, a bank clerk, the owner of a wireless shop in Birmingham, a professional racing driver, an assistant in a big store in Blackpool, were neither 'black' nor 'white', neither particularly bright nor troublesome. And finally came the two black sheep, Snooker and 'Haddock'. Snooker might have stepped straight out of one of Somerset Maugham's short stories. He was the type of man who insists so much upon his privileges as a gentleman that one feels doubtful of his being one. He was good-looking in the stereotyped way of a hero in a magazine story. He was six foot two, very masculine, sunburnt, blue-eyed and rather an exhibitionist. Before the war he had roamed through various British colonies where he had had something to do with 'horses and niggers'. At moments his accent reminded you of one of the less convincing announcers of the B.B.C. and at others of an American skit of a 'well-bred' Englishman. He insisted upon treating the service as he might a visit to poor relations. I could forgive him his way of arguing about every order and 'knowing' everything better than anyone else, but I found it difficult to take an equally tolerant view of his being disrespectful to Corporal Miller who, being unable to repay him in kind, pretended not to be aware of his pupil's offensive manners. Altogether a more lenient view of our friend Snooker might have been taken had he displayed any diligence in his work, but he seemed to suffer from an inherent distaste for exertion. He had the slow-moving brain, rightly or wrongly associated with that nothing-but-shootin'-and-huntin' type which has never been trained to use its mind. Moreover, he regarded as beneath his dignity much of what we were doing, such as cleaning guns or making ammunition belts. One evening I watched him play tennis, and, to my great surprise, found that his athletic prowess was in no way superior to his intellectual or mechanical capabilities. He played in an exaggerated manner, rather inefficiently and casually, as if concentration and perseverance were superfluous for one who exhibited so 'impressive' a style. Even for physical effort he seemed to feel contempt. Except for his handsome and expressionless face and his athletic figure, there was little to distinguish him as an asset to our squad. Without having the gift of prophecy you knew that his career in an operational squadron would not be easy, for the one thing with which such a squadron would have no patience was anything in the nature of a sham.

The real black sheep however was 'Haddock', thus nicknamed on account of his fish-like eyes. He walked about with his nose both metaphorically and literally turned up, and with an expression of eternally offended dignity. His chief handicap appeared to be his ancestry, for he seemed to imagine that his name was in itself enough to open to him all

those doors beyond which lay the knowledge, efficiency, and, finally, the success of an air-gunner. He was not devoid of brains, of a rather untidy sort, and would pick up a subject without much effort, but even less than Snooker was he willing to exert himself or to accept service life for what it was. He arrived late for lectures, wandered about the camp when he should have been on the range, and altogether committed every imaginable breach of discipline. Though he had a genius for getting on my nerves, I felt sorry for him. On two occasions I took him for a walk and tried to talk sense to him, painting glowing pictures of the life and the spirit that awaited us in operational squadrons and generally doing my hardest to break down the wall that separated him not only from his own squad but from the R.A.F. as a whole. But I had to give up in the end: I might have been talking to a lamp-post. He was podgy and small but had an enormous 'aristocratically' hooked nose, and with his haughty and strangely girlish voice, and an overbearing though nervous manner, suggested that the ancient blood that he had inherited had turned exceedingly thin. But however sorry I might feel for him, it was impossible to help him. Anyhow, there was too much work and too many tasks to concentrate for long on any particular individual. No-one seemed to worry when he was posted to another station.

IX

Apart from the minor difficulties with my squad I felt very happy in Sandfield's surroundings and among my new friends. I liked to spend several hours each day squatting on a school bench, listening to lectures, taking copious notes, sweating over the theory of harmonization or deflection, or arguing with my colleagues about tracer theory on which, without any justification, I regarded myself as an expert. I enjoyed firing on the range from different guns, manipulating different gun-turrets, doing exercises with spotlights. And though I never quite got over the initial moment of anxiety whenever I had to mount Demon, I loved the flying days and easily forgot the hours of waiting, the fatigue, and the occasional loss of temper. In spite of all these, or perhaps because of them, a flying day always ended in a state of such perfect contentment that it left no room for any ambitions, worries, or even thoughts. There was the early morning rush to the crew room, collecting harness, parachute, Mae West, and ammunition, getting into one's flying kit, getting out of it again after landing, delivering the empty magazines, waiting for the next turn to go up, waiting idly for hours whenever something went wrong with Demon's anatomy, or filling them with a sudden competition in morse with one's fellow sufferers, getting into a row with the pilot who had turned up too late or whom one had kept waiting. On some flying days there would be time to return to the mess for lunch; on others there would be none, and a couple of sandwiches had to replace a more substantial meal, but you knew that in the evening a decent dinner would be awaiting you in a mess that was handsome and friendly. You were everybody's equal,

even though the majority were lads in the twenties. Now that you no longer belonged to 'Special and Administrative Duties' but to 'General Duties', which meant flying, you saw disappear that last remnant of distinction which had separated you from the flying men.

Whatever anxieties I might have felt in the past about the dangers of air-gunnery melted completely in the warmth generated by the new fellowship. If there still lingered any anxiety in my mind, it was lest I be cheated of fulfilment by a refusal of the authorities to let me join 941 Squadron, and lest I be sent to some administrative job instead. I consulted Wing Commander Bould on that subject. He was the head of the school and one of the best-mannered disciplinarians I had ever known, and he promised that if I passed my exam and got my air-gunner's wing, he and the station C.O. would strongly support my application.

X

DIARY

The news from France is getting worse day by day, almost hour by hour. What does it imply—the end of France? Yet however grave the news may be, I must confess that in my present surroundings I find it difficult to feel very much perturbed by it. It is as if the job in hand and the clear aim ahead were the only realities, the war in France having little power to eclipse them. My attitude may be flippant and I might deplore it if I had reason to accuse myself of political escapism or self-complacency in the past. But no-one could have felt more apprehensive in regard to the German developments of recent years than I have done. Once the die was cast, however, I never for a moment doubted the ultimate outcome. The issues at stake are so clear, and the spiritual character of the opposing forces in this war so unequivocally defined, that I fail to see why because Germany is over-running France I should suddenly have any doubts about that final outcome. Whatever the purely material considerations might be, surely they cannot be decisive in a war whose underlying issues are so obviously being fought out on the spiritual plane. It is true that Germany has overrun Poland, Scandinavia, and other countries, yet if my views on the inevitable outcome were liable to fluctuate with every victory or defeat on the battle-fronts, then all the views that I have held for many years and that I was prepared to justify and defend to the last breath, would have seemed to be nothing but illusions.

How we shall contrive to defeat Germany after the imminent fall of France I do not know, but that we shall do so I do not doubt for a second. Perhaps because of this unwavering belief I regard my training and the whole life at Sandfield as of greater moment to myself than what is happening over in France. And I believe that everyone else shares that attitude. Both at Manhill and Morley and also at other operational stations I have realized that once you are in the R.A.F. it is the R.A.F. that is the only thing that matters. The war, politics, even the other armed services, form only the incidental background against which the life of the R.A.F. unrolls

itself. They provide material for after-dinner conversation but have not sufficient power to obtrude upon the daily business of our lives. Occasionally, when I wake up at night and suddenly think of the news from France, I feel anxious. But as soon as I become fully aware that I am not a civilian lying in bed at Stoughton, but am getting ready in the R.A.F. for combat, my fear vanishes and the news from France becomes like a distant accompaniment to next morning's flights and lectures.

XI

DIARY

This has been a record day in my flying career so far. Went up on eight different occasions. Had breakfast at seven and from a quarter to eight until six in the evening I spent all my time either flying and firing or dashing from the plane to the office to sign the flight book or to the armoury to collect or deliver ammunition. If it were not for the incessant hurrying to and fro between flights, even eight flights a day would not seem too much, but ten hours of that mixture of frantic bustle and concentrated work in the air tends to wear you down. I was unable to get to the mess for lunch or even to obtain a sandwich or a cup of tea, and as my inner man concentrated more and more on the idea of food, the trips became less enjoyable. Few jobs would seem to demand the foundation of perfect physical conditions more than flying does. Adequate rest, sleep, and decent food seem for a flying man even more essential than they are for any other hard worker.

*Once again the weather has been ideal and flying conditions perfect. The Demons, Battles, and Blenheims in which I went up pursued their courses as steadily as a ship on a calm lake, but towards the afternoon my tiredness and hunger began to tell, and instead of enjoying each flight as consciously as I had done during the morning, I was beginning to sit in my cockpit in a sort of stupor, letting my gaze wander listlessly over the unfolding scene beneath. There were roads, groups of houses, a church, all equally peaceful and toylke, fields with cows lying in the grass and looking like tiny slugs. But as the hours crept on and my inside grew weaker, I began to ask myself some of those silly questions that we are apt to ask when we are physically exhausted, hungry, and in consequence, annoyed with the world and ourselves: *Why am I doing all this? Do I really enjoy being buffeted about in one of the most uncomfortable cockpits ever invented and fighting against a slipstream that threatens to rip off my flying helmet and goggles? Do I enjoy going up and coming down, rushing across the aerodrome, feeling far too hot in my flying suit and yet cursing the cold slipstream? I know that it is right and proper for an air-gunner to enjoy all these sensations and that I should be relishing them. But am I really doing so? Of course I'm not; I'm hating every moment. And who is to blame for all this, who but myself? Unable to lay the blame at anyone else's door, I grew increasingly irritated.**

After the seventh trip I was hardly able to resist the temptation to ask whether my next trip might not be postponed for the morrow. Fortunately, for once, I didn't have to rush across the aerodrome to join my next plane

which usually would be waiting nearly half a mile away, and there was an interval of some fifteen minutes between the two flights. So without getting out of my flying kit, I threw myself on to the grass, and the air, the rest, and, I presume, the earth, revived me more than I should have imagined possible. The eighth flight turned out to be more enjoyable than any of the earlier ones, and even while I was firing, I knew that my score would be good. Not for a long time has my tea tasted better than it did to-day, and now, having gone early to bed to write these notes, I feel there is no life to compare with that of an air-gunner.

What a strange animal man is. Give him a little rest and a handful of food and he will stick to his philosophy and his aim in life with the fanaticism of a martyr. Deprive him of these few amenities and he will be ready to denounce everything he has ever believed in, and abandon his aim as though it were no more than an empty shell-case.

XII

When I first arrived at Sandfield I wrote to Kellett informing him of my move and asking whether his promise to accept me in his squadron still held good. His answer came from a hospital. In spite of all his efforts he had not been able to carry on, had to undergo a lengthy cure and had thus been forced to give up the command of 941. But he promised to send on my letter to Wing Commander Barclay, his successor at Manhill. A few days later I received a letter from Barclay. It was brief but contained the following words, 'I shall be very pleased for you to be posted to 941 Squadron.' No dozen words in the English language could have sounded more beautiful to me. They meant that the dream of many months was about to come true.

My only worry was whether I should ever be able to reach the high standards of 941 Squadron. I did not seem below that of my far younger colleagues on our course, and had been able to cope with the exacting and exhausting duties at Sandfield. But Manhill was quite different. And should I ever overcome fear in combat? I had asked myself these questions a thousand times before, but the occasion was particularly apposite for them. Then my eye fell again on Barclay's letter and the word Manhill on the notepaper, and, once again, I felt elated. And in turn the elation gave place to a wonderful sensation of inner calm. Yes, Manhill, 941, air-gunnery, these were the things that had become for me identical with home and contentment. They were the brightest threads in the pattern that fate was weaving for me. And there was a deeper meaning in them as well. Was it not that I had to learn a lesson that I had not learned before: how to overcome physical strain and to master danger? In the course of my forty years, I had garnered many lessons from the life of the mind. Surely it was time to learn from the life of physical exertion and from danger. I might, possibly, have stayed out of it. But could escape ever lead to reality? And for the time being, both in personal terms and in those of the war, action in the fullest sense of the word represented reality. Not by

avoiding what I feared but by overcoming it could I hope to meet life squarely. Indeed, I had reason enough to feel grateful for the message from Manhill.

XIII

Probably no other occupation causes such frequent changes of mood as does flying. Even more than the sailor, the airman depends upon the weather. The entire rhythm of his life is dictated by it. At all the stations at which I had served or which I had visited, I always noticed how the moods would change with a frequency quite unknown in any other community, and invariably this was due to changes in the weather. But it was only at Sandfield, where I was neither a guest nor a spectator of other people's flying and where most of my own days were spent in the air, that I realized fully the influence of the weather upon the general mood.

On the day that followed my evening of elation over the letter from Barclay, everyone, myself included, was in the worst possible temper. For weeks the sky had been an unbroken expanse of blue, with the sun shining from the moment you got up until you went to bed at night. Just as my memory of Sleethole would for ever be one of the coldest winters, with blizzards, snowbound roads, and burst water-pipes, so that of Sandfield would be of Mediterranean skies, incessant heat, and blossoming trees. What opportunities for air-gunners whose normal three months' course had to be squeezed into four brief weeks!

In view of Barclay's letter I was looking forward more keenly than ever to my firing, determined to beat all my previous scores and to celebrate the occasion by a record that would represent a real advance along the road to Manhill. But when I went up on my first flight haze enveloped the entire aerodrome. It instantly made me fear that conditions would deteriorate further. Though my first flight started soon after seven the heat was already oppressive. We came down at eight and by that time the atmosphere was reminiscent of that of Colombo or Singapore. The sun was blazing from a cloudless sky, but you hardly saw it through the opaque yellow mist. I was to get up again at eight-thirty, but a few minutes before we were to take off, all flying was suspended for an hour.

Like everyone else I had taken off my uniform and was wearing nothing but a shirt under the overalls that I preferred to the far heavier weight of the flying suit. But even so the heat made all movement a strain. The fitters and armourers inside the hangar were working stripped to the waist, sweat trickling from their faces and their bodies smeared with oil. For once, the slipstream in the Demon would have been a blessing, but instead of enjoying it, we sat about in the crew room waiting, and every twenty minutes or so sending one of our number to get the latest weather report from the plotting office. I had brought along my practice buzzer, and those who still had some energy left, formed a circle to practise morse. Less than a week separated us from the final exam., and the high-pitched tone of the little instrument buzzing its irregular da-di-das reminded us

of the fact that we were still far from the requisite standard of speed. Del Rios, who had given up all hope of mastering more than two words per minute, no longer took any interest in morse. Instead he had brought along a Browning gun and throughout the morning went on stripping and assembling it, in the process jamming and cutting his fingers and covering himself with oil. But nothing could damp his enthusiasm and he carried on with a passionate determination that contrasted amusingly with the inevitable cigar held between his lips as in a vice.

But on a flying day all you wanted to do was to fly. No matter how nervous you might feel before a flight, it was flying and firing that gave sense and substance to your entire life. So the sultry weather with its clammy mist affected the whole squad, and not merely physically. Every now and again someone would come in to report that over the sea the weather was improving and that flying would start at any moment. The three or four men detailed for the next flight would hurriedly put on their Mae Wests, fish out helmets, goggles, and gloves from their lockers, and move to the tarmac. Five minutes later they would return with faces sourer than ever. At regular intervals, the surroundings would indeed grow lighter and the outlines of aircraft on the tarmac become visible; but such breaks were short-lived and were soon succeeded by yellow opaqueness.

The day lingered on lazily. Even the spasmodic roar of an aircraft tested in the hangar failed to redeem the universal apathy. If ever there was a wasted day, this was it. Though no actual clashes occurred, by 3 p.m. few people were really on speaking terms, each one wrapped in his own annoyance. But just before tea, someone at H.Q. had the inspiration to call off all activities and, the day being well advanced and a Saturday, we were dismissed for the rest of it. It was the first free afternoon we had had since the beginning of our course.

After a cold bath, I went for a walk through the various parts of the station. Needless to say, almost as soon as everyone was dismissed, the weather began to improve, the mist thinned, and a red sun appeared in the bluish-white sky. Airmen, single or in groups, were lying on stretches of grass in front of their quarters, stripped, except for bathing trunks. Some few of them were still white-skinned; others were lobster-red and likely to spend a particularly painful night; but the majority had already acquired a sufficient dose of tan to protect themselves from exposure to the sun, and to safeguard the aesthetic susceptibilities of the passers-by. From open windows several wireless sets, turned on at full blast, were sending out the usual cacophony of jazz tunes. Sandfield had acquired the character of a miniature Southend. Most of the airmen were asleep; a few were busy mending their garments; others read or gossiped. On the tennis courts dotted about among their quarters the more energetic of them, in shorts and gym shoes, were playing tennis. At first, the juxtaposition of seminaked bodies and hangars, aeroplanes, and petrol dumps struck you as incongruous or, possibly, merely un-English. At the same time, the

stifling heat, the almost tropical opaqueness of the atmosphere and the general sense of languor made the nakedness appear a more natural part of the general scene than did its more legitimate features. In fact, nakedness and laziness were truly appropriate to the character of the wasted day.

XIV

Very wisely the authorities realized that three weeks' incessant training without a single day's break might easily produce general staleness and, in consequence, we were given the Sunday off. Once again the weather was hot, but without Saturday's oppressive sultriness. Everyone who was not on duty left the camp for the near-by beaches or for some country hotel. At first I was uncertain what to do; but then decided to follow the advice of Del Rios who had spoken to me in glowing terms of a hotel to which he had decided to depart on the previous evening for a week-end with his wife. Soon after breakfast I set off in my car, and after an hour's drive reached the promised land. Del Rios had been right. The hotel, a former private house, was situated in a large and beautiful garden, resplendent with blossoming rhododendrons and azaleas.

Almost as soon as I arrived, I came across Del Rios, cheerful and laughing and, as always, preoccupied with something or other. After a few minutes we were joined by his wife, looking surprisingly as I had imagined her—tall, blonde, beautiful, and Junoesque, and wearing an astounding collection of jewellery. She had brought several of their friends with her from London. The other two women who appeared with her were equally tall and blonde, their faces covered with a thick layer of paint and powder. They were wearing 'Riviera clothes', flimsy, provocative, brightly coloured; clothes, that is to say, that to anyone who for a solid three weeks had seen nothing but R.A.F. uniforms or flying kit, came as a shock. That Chico, as they all called Del Rios, should be in the R.A.F. and wearing an Air Force uniform, was regarded by them either as 'too, too marvellous' or as a huge joke. They were preparing to drive off for the day to a beach some twenty miles away.

The whole party was dominated by an American woman in black satin slacks, wine-coloured sandals, and mauve-coloured toenails. Apparently it was she who had insisted that Mrs. Del Rios instead of 'selfishly' spending a week-end with her husband alone, should turn the occasion into a 'swell party' for her London friends. It was equally she, addressed by everyone as Dolores, who obviously directed all the arrangements for the day.

'I say, why don't you come with us?' she turned to me. 'It would be swell to have another man in uniform, don't you agree, Jane? There'll be enough food for everyone. We're taking chickens, lobsters, caviare, and champagne. Are you sure, Chico angel, we've got enough champagne to keep us alive through the day? The only thing we haven't thought of is bathing costumes. Do you think, Jane darling, I can go swimming in my slip and brassière? I've got a swell satin brassière, turquoise colour, quite

virginal. The boys can wear their pants, can't you, Chico angel; your Air Marshal won't mind, will he?'

Del Rios gave me a nervous look as if wondering how I was taking the sudden initiation into all those sartorial and culinary mysteries. But he seemed very happy to be spending a week-end with his wife, and, without awaiting my reply, began to laugh. Pulling me by the arm, he shouted, 'Yes, you come with us, you must come', and then, using one of his particularly 'English' phrases, he added excitedly, 'if you don't come it wouldn't be cricket'.

It was no doubt extremely foolish of me, but not having visualized my quiet week-end in terms of a picnic with lobsters and champagne, turquoise-coloured virginal brassière and pants and, possibly, still unable to dissociate myself entirely from the alarming news that the wireless had brought from the French battle fronts at breakfast-time, I simply felt unable to accept the invitation. Fortunately, no-one seemed to mind in the least, and before I had actually stammered my thanks, they had all started to walk towards two enormous American cars in which the waiters were stowing picnic baskets, bottles, and glasses.

Just when they were ready to get into the cars Dolores exclaimed, 'I'll die if I don't get some champagne and chewing-gum.'

Within a minute a glass of champagne was produced for her but no-one had any chewing-gum. Having become familiar at Manhill and Bentley with its soothing propensities during a flight, I always carried a packet of it in my pocket, so was now able to offer it to the fair lady.

'Oh, I couldn't possibly rob you of it,' she protested, 'I really couldn't, surely you won't be able to live without any through Sunday.' But she accepted it in the end and turned to Del Rios, 'I say, Chico angel, why don't you make your friend come with us; he's a swell guy and I kinda fell for him the moment you produced him. I guess he's afraid there won't be enough for him to eat. He can have all my lobster and chicken; I don't mind living just on caviare, do I, Chico angel, you know me well enough.' By the time she had finished the sentence, she had forgotten my existence and was busily deciding who was to sit with whom and exhorting everyone not to waste any more of their precious time.

After they had gone, I walked through the gardens and within five minutes forgot the mauve-coloured toenails and the champagne and even the news earlier in the morning. The garden was full of remarkable shrubs and flowers, and at first it seemed strange that they should just continue to bloom in all their beauty as though there were no war and no nine o'clock news from France. Already on my few visits to Stoughton I had realized how my complete dissociation from the peace-time world, in which gardening occupied such an important place, had made me look upon that world as unreal. It may have been this character of unreality and other-worldliness that gave an added attraction to the countless varieties of blossoming azaleas, Tibetan and Chinese rhododendrons, uncommon irises. Anyhow, there it was, and the enchantment of the beauti-

ful garden was an undisputable fact. So I gave myself unreservedly to its enjoyment, and, after an excellent lunch, wandered through the garden and lay on the grass. Most of the other hotel guests were spending the afternoon on the terrace, reading or playing bridge, and I had the garden practically to myself. After an extravagant tea (strawberries and cream!) I set course for home, driving in leisurely fashion through the countryside. I reached Sandfield refreshed and contented and looking forward to dinner with an appetite that was as big as it was unwarranted.

XV

'To-morrow is the final exam and to-day is hell.' These were the only words that I found time to jot down in my diary on the day which most of us were likely to remember for a pretty long time to come. Throughout our course practically everyone had been working very hard, but when the actual exam was only twenty-four hours distant I was not the only one to realize with a sense of profound dismay what an awful lot there was to know and how little of it we did know. There were three different machine-guns to be mastered—two of them we were supposed to strip and assemble blindfolded within two minutes; there were three gun-turrets with their complicated hydraulic or electro-hydraulic systems; there was the theory of tracer, and of sighting, morse, harmonization of guns, tactics, ammunition and, of course, actual flying. For an outsider the spectacle of forty prospective air-gunners on the eve of the exam must have been diverting. Most of them walked about carrying all their notes, manuals, and diagrams under their arms. Suddenly groups of three or four would retire into some corner or other and try to solve a problem that was regarded as particularly intricate. Every one of them of course assumed that he knew the only correct answer, but after five minutes' discussion they would realize that they were all equally ignorant of it. Frantically they would take refuge in their notebooks trying to discover the right answer. Several bright individuals decided that the only way to be on the safe side was to learn as much as possible by heart. In consequence you would see them running up and down a passage or in front of the mess, mumbling to themselves, 'Three Number One stoppages; four Number Two stoppages . . . Number One stoppages are caused by . . .' or, 'Tracer G One lights up for so many yards, G Two—for so many yards . . .' They created the impression of weird marionettes, automatically reciting words and formulae that had become practically meaningless to them. Others retired to their bedrooms in a heroic effort to recapitulate the entire course within a few hours. Others still would rush excitedly to a colleague who happened to be about and either question him upon some imperfectly memorized subject or seek to reassure themselves as to their own knowledge by forcing their answers upon their helpless victim. 'Do you want to know about the deflection angle? I'll tell you. The deflection angle is . . .'

None of us seemed to have realized that our feverish final spurt repre-

sented a sheer waste of time and that we were not likely to derive much benefit from rushing through a dozen complicated subjects within a few frantic hours. But it is all very well to be wise after the event. On the eve of the fateful day I was as much affected by the prevailing spirit as everyone else, and went about repeating to myself formulae that I had failed to get into my head during the course.

The only ones who suddenly appeared to have a halo about their heads were those 'in the know'. They belonged to the small class that had made it their far-sighted habit to take our instructors out for drinks in the nearby pub and be matey with them. Now, they would take you aside and whisper in your ear, 'Sergeant Lewis concentrates entirely on theory of sighting', 'Flight Sergeant Brown always asks what stoppage is caused if the transporter claw in the Vickers gun is damaged'. 'This is Sergeant Smith's special formula for harmonization; quite different from the one we've been taught; what a shame to think of the time we've wasted!' And with the benevolent expression of selfless Samaritans they would walk away to be replaced a few minutes later by someone else equally willing to allow a few timorous souls to benefit by the glow of his own secret knowledge. 'When you're asked to strip a gun,' they would say, 'for God's sake don't forget first to make sure that it isn't loaded, and then start with the muzzle attachment. If you don't do that you lose at least twenty points. I have it from Sergeant Williams personally.' You made hasty notes, mental or other, and in the end withdrew into the only haven left to you: that of hope. At any rate, I did so, and after tea gave up all further efforts and forced myself not to think of anything in any way related to air-gunnery.

Fortunately the harrowing day ended better than it had begun, for we gave a party to our instructors and pilots. It took place in an inn, situated in a charming old farmhouse, a couple of miles outside the aerodrome. There was a brook in front, and an old-fashioned garden at the back, and the evening was cloudless and warm. All the pilots whose job it had been to take us up day by day were there, and so were the sergeants and flight sergeants who were our instructors. Everyone was wearing his Number One uniform and was looking his smartest. Barrels of beer and a long table laden with enormous piles of sandwiches, sausage rolls, and buns were placed on the lawn and with the first few glasses of beer all the initial shyness was washed away. The inn, the beer, the old elms in the garden, and the fields stretching beyond it, the jokes and good cheer, all these seemed to symbolize England and English tradition at their most attractive. Next day's exam was the subject of much leg-pulling, and some of the officers kidded themselves that if they could get the instructors really drunk, next day's trial was bound to be got over quickly and without undue difficulties. It would, however, have taken more than the available amount of beer to make our well-seasoned sergeants drunk.

The party was the only occasion on which we all met socially, officers and N.C.O.s, instructors, pilots, and pupils. Normally you saw them only individually in the classroom or in the aircraft; during our hurried meals

in the mess there was never much time to get to know anyone. Seeing our pilots only under such unsatisfactory circumstances, I had never realized what a delightful lot most of them were, and felt sorry never to have had an opportunity to become more intimately acquainted with them. Had our party taken place at the beginning instead of at the end of the course, I might have made friends with several of them. How lucky I am, the thought suddenly came to me, making me feel very happy: from now on all these youngsters, so free from all pettiness and so cheerful, will be my companions for the remainder of the war. I had been sufficiently long in the service to know that Sandfield was not an exception and that even if by some mischance I was not sent to Manhill, I should yet find myself in an environment not dissimilar to that of Sandfield.

XVI

Everything has to come to an end some time, even the day of an exam. Though it ended well, it had begun with a personal disappointment. On the preceding day the official list of our postings appeared. Instead of being sent straight abroad as we had anticipated, we were to follow the normal routine of working first with Operational Training Units. Since from the very beginning I had been concentrating, as far as was possible at Sandfield, on everything related to Wellingtons, the Air Ministry had very wisely chosen for me a Wellington O.T.U., namely, one in Scotland. As it had been my ambition to serve for a time in Scotland I was delighted with that decision.

On the morning of the exam I discovered that on the list of postings on the blackboard the name of my O.T.U. had been crossed out and the name S.C., Bentley, put instead. I went straight to see Wing Commander Bould, the head of our school, to find out what this meant.

The Wing Commander was kind as ever, but he had no idea what the reason for the change might be. 'I don't know what the Air Ministry want to do with you, but late last night a signal came cancelling your previous posting and sending you as the only one from this course to the S.C. Well, great men deserve great honours,' he laughed. 'I hope you realize it's something of an honour to be sent straight from an air-gunner's course to the S.C. Only officers with a good deal of operational experience are being sent there, and none of our pupils has ever gone straight from here to Bentley. Obviously the Air Ministry have marked you down for something big. You'll probably become chief air-gunnery instructor to all the Poles.' He chuckled, but I didn't quite share his high spirits. I had always mistrusted last-minute changes in the service. Though I had been looking forward to Scotland I was glad that the new place was to be Bentley. After my course there, not much in air-gunnery would be left that I should be ignorant of. If only there were no sinister implications in the sudden change!

The exam was spread over most of the day. My own turn didn't come

till eleven, but I had no time beforehand to indulge in last-minute cramming. I had been anxious to get some more firing practice, so in the morning I went up twice in a Battle. It was evidently my lucky day. The conditions were ideal, with no wind and perfect visibility. On both occasions my own pilot as well as the one towing the drogue kept a steady course; my gun had been properly cleaned, the magazines carefully loaded. So I wasn't surprised that my scores of the last morning were the highest I had ever achieved, and thus bound to improve my final record.

I had hardly got out of my flying kit when my time for the exam arrived. The day was hot and both the 'virgins' and the 'victims'—as those before and after the trial were called—walked about as though they were attending their own funeral: the victims because they were convinced that they had done far worse than they had anticipated, and the virgins, well, for pretty obvious reasons.

We had a dozen different subjects, and each one of us had to pass through the hands of four different instructors, each instructor taking about a quarter of an hour. 'Knowing' that it was my lucky day, I was not surprised that the examiners questioned me only about things that I knew: the theory of tracer, principles of ballistics, mechanism of the Hispano cannon, stripping of the Browning gun, recognition of small arms ammunition, theory of harmonization. Not a single question about the confounded electro-hydraulic system which I had never been able to master! By lunch it was all over and I was a free man.

The rest of the day was more or less chaotic. There was packing to be done, log books brought up to date, certain parts of our equipment sorted out to be returned, but most of the time was taken up by gossip about our future movements. 'They're sending you to Blenheims? Ugh, not me, not for a shipload of monkeys. Nothing but daylight bombing. You're a casualty before you know you're off,' 'Sunderlands? Lucky devil, you'll be living at the Ritz.' 'What's wrong with Whitleys? Not so good as Wellingtons? You can have your Wellingtons any day and I'll come in a Whitley to attend your funeral.' 'Did you hear about Jimmy's luck? They've accepted him for Defiants. There was only one Defiant vacancy. I suppose it's nothing but his size that got him the job. You want to be less than five foot nine, and less than ten stone for Defiants.' 'Well, I don't envy him. I'd hate to be in a bastard fighter. Give me a bomber any day. I like living in comfort and 250 miles top speed is good enough for me.' 'I say,' I found myself addressed, 'how did you wangle this S.C. business? What it is to be on good terms with the Wingcol?' 'Well, R.L., you have my blessing. I'd rather be in an O.T.U. than at the S.C. Why, man, while we're flying as crews doing the proper stuff, you'll still be sticking with your behind to a school bench. Not me, sir, thank you.'

We all talked more nonsense than we had ever done before, and everyone was trying to disguise that empty feeling that comes with anticlimax and that is the unmistakable herald of imminent separation. We had not always seen eye to eye with one another, there might have been a certain

amount of friction in our mutual relationships, there had even been minor rows, but we had all learned to enjoy the feeling of being a unit and we took pride in that fact. Of course, Number Four squad was top! 'What, those nancies of Number Two squad? Every time they take off, they need a wet nurse beforehand.' 'Don't talk to me about Number One squad, they're no better than a pack of gangsters. Why, they're the ones who always pinch your gloves and goggles. And the blighters don't even know how to salute.' 'As for Number Three, what a lousy lot! They'll be shot down before they've left the ground. I bet they don't even know the difference between G. One and G. Two tracer.' 'Number Four? Now you're talking. Everyone knows you can't beat them. Why, the Wingco himself the other day . . .' Yes, even within those short four weeks we had become a united body and the ten former civilians had developed an *esprit de corps* which, though it often might express itself in childish ways, was nevertheless genuine enough. We had gone through the mill together; had seen one another's pale faces before and, at times, even after a flight; had shared each other's thrills; had tried to master identical difficulties and disclosed to one another identical limitations; and altogether, there wasn't much that we had managed to keep secret from one another. Probably few things held us more firmly together than the memory of experiences shared. There was, for example, that memorable occasion in a Wellington, when after an hour's flight over the coast we returned to Sandfield only to find that the undercarriage of the aircraft had got jammed. The pilot's efforts were of no avail—he was a lad of twenty-two with a passion for Beethoven, bits of whose compositions he would whistle while in the plane, on the tarmac, in the mess. We circled and circled and circled round the aerodrome; we descended to less than a hundred feet and rose again; we could clearly distinguish the individual people who were standing below in groups, attentively following our helpless efforts yet unable to come to our assistance. Our wireless was out of order and there was no means of getting instructions from below. We hadn't started till after tea and it was rapidly growing darker. After half an hour's vain efforts we were beginning to feel like mice caught in a trap and our hearts were beating faster and faster—at any rate, mine was. To jump or not to jump, was the question with which every one of the four air-gunners was preoccupied. The only circumstance that helped them to control their fears was their thought of the terrible responsibility that rested on the young pilot's shoulders. It was for him to give the decisive word whether we should bale out or not. The lad with whom we had been used to gossip and joke in the mess had suddenly grown to an utterly unfamiliar stature. For the four of us he had become a sort of deity and, as we hoped ardently, a miracle-worker. He was the only one who could save us. What little knowledge of hydraulics we four might have possessed was limited exclusively to the gun turret, and the workings of the undercarriage were a mystery to us. As it happened, not one of the motor experts on our course was in the plane and we were of less assistance to the pilot than the youngest fitter or rigger on the aerodrome would have been.

When the day was really merging into night, the miracle for which we had been hoping took place and the undercarriage came down as unexpectedly as an hour previously it had jammed.

Yes, this was one of the many memories that none of us was likely to forget. And then there was our first 'oxygen flight', going up to thirty thousand feet, experiencing the oxygen mask and testing for the first time our capabilities in the rarefied air. 'What did it feel like? Did you remember your name? Could you load the gun? Were you able to subtract three from seven?' Those were the questions with which our colleagues had bombarded us after we had landed. And then the first spin. And the cine-camera gun. And the day over the range when one of us instead of firing at the target shot up the marksman's hut and all but killed the unhappy wretch inside. A thousand little incidents that at the time had seemed commonplace or irritating suddenly came floating up into memory, producing a strangely fascinating glow.

Now it was all to come to an end. Should we ever meet again? Whose name would be the first to appear in the *London Gazette* with the letters D.F.C. beneath it, and whose in the list of those killed?

So far as the pilots and the other members of the station's permanent staff were concerned, we had already become strangers. The link between them and ourselves had snapped. To-morrow we should leave, and on the following day members of the new course would arrive, in civilian clothes, timid or boisterous, pretending that they knew 'all about it' or trying hard not to make any too obvious mistakes. It would be they before whom Corporal Miller would stand with his drooping shoulders and his understanding smile and whom the pilots would take up in the rickety Demons.

XVII

It did not require any exceptional perspicacity to discover that our excited gossiping and untidy questioning throughout the afternoon was due not merely to our desire to hide the feelings evoked by the impending conclusion of our course but equally by our anxiety about the results of the exam. Not until just before dinner did the long sheet of paper finally appear on the blackboard in the mess. I tried to push my head through those who eagerly crowded round it but failed, and before I was able to find my own name, the man in front of me exclaimed, 'What a wizard score, R.L., right on top of us, 90 per cent.' At first I couldn't believe my ears, but there it was, 90 per cent against my name. The next-best man had scored 84. 'It was bound to happen, wasn't it?' someone else addressed me. 'After all, you've been in the Raff long enough.' He was right and I should really have had to feel ashamed if I had not been able to do better than the newcomers who, despite their superior mechanical qualifications, had come straight from civilian life. And yet until the very last day I had never imagined that I should come off so well. But wasn't it my lucky day, when nothing I did could go wrong? On the way to the exam I had seemed

to feel that I simply couldn't be asked any questions but those to which I knew the answers. Everyone was kind and Del Rios clutched my arm, shouting excitedly, 'Well done, well done, topping, topping, old man. I always knew it. Topping score. Now be a sport, old man, and have a cigar. To celebrate.'

XVIII

The last morning was filled with formalities and farewells. No farewell was friendlier than that of Corporal Miller, the junior among all the instructors and the one whose squad had achieved a greater number of top scores than any other. In his quiet and unobtrusive way he had become the friend of each one of us and an example to all. We really felt sad when during a short and unofficial little ceremony we shook hands with him for the last time. A week earlier I had suggested to the squad that we should present Corporal Miller with a souvenir, and Del Rios and I had been delegated to choose the right present and arrange for a suitable inscription. So we had gone to the only jeweller's in the near-by town and had chosen the handsomest and largest silver cigarette case in stock and had had all our names engraved in it, with the Corporal's name and a dedication on top. In the name of the squad I made the presentation, and the Corporal, taken completely by surprise, turned a violent red and for the first time in all those weeks lost his composure and his aptitude for finding the right word.


The official climax of the morning was provided by the farewell address by Wing Commander Bould. Everyone had been looking forward impatiently to the occasion, since it would imply that we at last had permission to pin the much coveted air-gunner's wing to our tunics. Before we had passed the exam we hadn't, of course, been air-gunners but merely pupils, and had no right to the badge. This does not mean, however, that there was a single one amongst us who had waited till the last moment before providing himself with one. Badges were not to be had at Sandfield, so during the last few days every one who got a chance to slip out in the evening and reach the near-by little town had done so to buy his badge. Snooker and the former racing driver had pinned theirs to their tunics as soon as the exam results had appeared on the blackboard, but they did not bask in their new glory for long. When after dinner in the mess the Wing Commander spotted them, he asked them loudly enough to be heard by everyone present, on whose authority they had fixed on their badges. Would they please remove them instantly? The two blushing culprits inquired whether they might return to their rooms and change into their wingless tunics, but the Wing Commander said no, and insisted that they remove their badges on the spot and in front of the entire company. So they had to cut through the stitches with their pocket knives and thus undo the artful handiwork of the afternoon.

At the end of his farewell speech the Wingco finally pronounced the

words for which everyone had been waiting. 'Now that you will join operational training units and fly as crews with your own pilots and navigators, you are entitled to your air-gunner's wing. I am certain every one of you realizes what it means to wear the R.A.F. wings, and I hope you'll live up to that honour. Good luck to you all.'

The farewell address was followed by a general rush to the mess. Within a minute or so everyone changed into his second tunic, to which a harassed batman had been sewing the wing. The discarded tunic was left to be similarly attended to by lunch-time.

It wasn't till after lunch that I finally got into my little car to drive for the last time past the guardroom and through the gate. How else could I feel but sad at leaving behind the scene of four particularly happy weeks, a handsome aerodrome, helpful instructors, ever patient pilots and the general atmosphere of cheerful fellowship? Even the few German aircraft whose bombs in near-by fields had on several nights disturbed our sleep had not succeeded in interfering with our enjoyment of the course. Sandfield had been a good and happy place.



Chapter Two

FIRE CONTROL

I

I arrived in London in time for dinner, spent the night there, and after driving throughout the better part of Sunday, reached Bentley in the evening. It seemed little changed since I had been there in November, but with the sunlit sky and the rhododendrons in full bloom on each sandy dune surrounding the aerodrome, there was a new note of gaiety. In the anteroom many of the old faces looked up from their cans of beer as if surprised to see me again, among them those of Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe, the Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Spense, and a good many others. Even an old acquaintance from Manhill had joined the Bentley crowd, and by the time we had settled down to dinner, which I was invited to share with the C.O. and the senior officers at the top table, I felt as though I had hardly ever left the place. The food was excellent and my new colleagues were looking forward to our course as keenly as I was. The course was to begin at eight o'clock next morning.

II

DIARY

Though, unlike Sandfield, Bentley does not provide me with a bedroom with running water and other up-to-date comforts, but merely a cubicle in a wooden hut, I at least have this to myself. Thus I realize how physically tiring it has been to share a room with someone else. I shouldn't mind having a room-mate if during the day I could have a few moments to myself, but from when you get up till you go to bed you are never alone. Many people undoubtedly enjoy perpetual company, and this seems particularly true of my younger colleagues, who even after having retired to their bedrooms never seem to stay there, but visit one another in dressing-gowns and pyjamas and sit about gossiping till they can hardly keep their eyes open. Personally I find the incessant buzz of company rather trying. In fact, if I had to name the aspect of service life which is the most difficult to endure I should give pride of place to the complete lack of solitude. Without it there can be no question of securing real rest. Yet after a certain age, to collect oneself and one's thoughts becomes just as imperative as purely physical rest. Thus I regard my little cubicle with its thin asbestos walls as a great advance upon the lavish appurtenances of my bedroom at Sandfield.

All of my new colleagues have been in the R.A.F. for a long time and come from operational squadrons. Naturally, their manners and discip-

line cannot be compared with those of the Sandfield crowd, and their only interest in life seems to be air-gunnery. As the only one among them who does not come from an operational unit, I feel, in spite of my more varied R.A.F. experiences, as green as a lettuce leaf. They have all taken part in raids over Germany, in patrols over the North Sea, or in escorting convoys. They are specially picked men sent here by their squadrons not merely for an advanced gunnery course but to participate in what is supposed to be our main job, namely that of developing certain entirely new tactics in air-gunnery. At the conclusion of our experiments we shall emerge from Bentley as Gunnery Leaders. Each of my colleagues is imbued with a sense of the significance of our work here and is looking forward to it with an infectious keenness.

If it were not for the alarming news from France—the French have laid down their arms and asked for an armistice—we should all be feeling extremely happy. But however much one may retain one's equanimity in face of even the gravest events, it is difficult to do so if one's own immediate prospects appear to be affected by them. And gossip has it that our course may come to an end almost before it has properly started, and that everyone may be sent back to their squadrons within a day or two. I am the only one who views this prospect not only with complete unconcern but even with hope. For would it not mean Manhill at last? Where else could I be sent at short notice?

As to the wider issues of the moment, like everyone else I find it impossible to interpret their indications and to discern what destiny means by this latest exaltation of Germany. That there is a deeper meaning behind it all I have no doubt, nor can I believe that even our piteous setbacks of the moment will have any effect upon the final outcome.

In 1937 I wrote in my diary: 'The coming world war will be far more than merely an armed struggle. It will express not only political or economic conflicts but the profoundest spiritual revolution known in modern history, a revolution, moreover, of both nations and individuals. Hardly any nation will be able to escape from it or from its effects. Those who will try to do so—God help them. For if we don't recognize that its true purpose is to shake us to the depths of our innermost spiritual core—farewell civilization.' In my own insignificant life the revolutionizing impact of the war made itself felt much sooner than I could have anticipated at the time when I wrote those words. It did so in the very early stages of my service career. Yet in those now so strangely remote days, I often played with the idea that that impact represented no more than an adventure, comparable, perhaps, with a journey to distant lands.

My journey through the first nine or ten months of the war has produced changes that to-day appear to me fairly radical. I almost feel as if my innermost self had undergone some change, but the fact that I have not yet taken part in any actual fighting seems to have but little bearing upon it. Even now there are still occasions when I suddenly find myself asking whether my existence among aeroplanes and guns, without my former

friends or interests, without books, artistic or intellectual pursuits, without my home, without the countryside: whether that existence is real or merely a dream from which I shall wake up at any moment. True, of late such occasions have been rare, and only the fact that rain brought our activities to a premature end this afternoon has given me more time for my diary than merely to record the events of the day. So once again I can cast a backward glance and measure the distance of the journey so far. On more normal days with no time for introspection I regard as perfectly natural the change from my former individualism to the position of a cog in a machine. However difficult and at times painful my job at Sleethole may have been, it afforded opportunities for individual self-assertion. During the last few weeks this has ceased completely. In peace-time the very prospect of such a state of affairs would have appalled me. To-day I derive a new sense of satisfaction from it. And strangely enough, this sense grows in proportion as the war news becomes more sombre. At a time like the present, to lead an independent existence with private problems and private worries would seem almost unendurable. The community, whether in the larger national sense or that of one's more restricted and immediate war task, is not only so much more important than the individual self but is even recognized as such by that self. And this latter point seems to me an important one. For it is one thing to recognize a certain truth intellectually without, however, identifying oneself with it, and another to be so vitally imbued with it as to subordinate oneself to it without reserve.

There appeared in to-day's daily routine orders the notice that in the event of a German attack upon our aerodrome the members of our course will have to man the aircraft as air-gunners and go up to fight. For my colleagues there will be nothing new in this. I am the only exception, and what for the others will be in the nature of a routine job, to me, I admit, still appears a tremendous adventure. Yet I must be on my guard not to reveal by a single word or gesture that it is so and that such a difference exists between them and myself. There must be nothing, however insignificant, to distinguish me from them. In pre-war days I should never have imagined myself capable of developing so strong a sense of loyalty to any community. To-day I cherish that sense jealously and derive a feeling of wonderful contentment from it. At Sleethole I never quite overcame the feeling of being an intruder, and, against my will, was forced to withdraw into the individualist's shell. Even at Sandfield, especially during the first few days, the civilian attitude of my colleagues was liable to cause friction and endanger the establishment of true esprit de corps. The men among whom I am working at Bentley, however, take discipline as a matter of course and are deliberately setting out to cultivate that spirit. Practically all of them come from the ranks and had been sergeant air-gunners before they received their commission. They still regard their status as officers as an honour and are endeavouring to live up to it. All that matters to them is their job. Personal non-essentials, such as used to dominate the entire life of Sleethole, never seem to enter their thoughts. In their dealings with one

another they are straightforward, and their manners are exemplary. Being the senior air-gunners of their squadrons, with all the experience and the number of flying hours that are implied by that position, there are no real youngsters among them. A dozen or so are in the thirties, the majority are in the mid-twenties. Once again, it is the younger ones who seem to represent the finest spirit. Is it that for a man in the twenties it is easier to be entirely selfless and devoted to a cause, regardless of all personal privilege? A melancholy question, for should not increase in experience and, presumably, in wisdom, reveal the folly of ambition?

To man an aircraft with these young men in an emergency will no doubt make that particular task far easier than it might otherwise be. At times I still have to pinch myself to realize that I am truly a member of so inspiring a team and that I may not suddenly wake up and find myself in my bed at Sleethole.

III

After the first two days we plunged straight away into the experimental work for which we had been sent to Bentley. We went up every day in formation, usually consisting of half a dozen big bombers and two fighters to attack us. Every air-gunner in turn had to take over fire control for the formation, and though standing in the astrodome of the leading aircraft I missed my guns, the experience proved fascinating. There was a fly in the ointment, however, and it was provided by German raiders. The beginning of our course coincided with German efforts to knock out a naval base which lay on the course of our daily flights. Though we were forbidden to fly over that base, only a few miles separated our course from it, and on our very first day clouds of smoke billowed out from a freighter that had been hit and lay there helplessly.

Before our flight Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe—because of his freckles called Ginger-Dud—summoned us to the crew room for a conference during which he gave us final instructions, especially regarding R.T. which for some of us was still something of a novelty. It was, in fact, one of our jobs to try to develop and perfect that system or, rather, the wording applied for it. One of his instructions was that the Hurricane and Defiant that were to attack us, should be referred to by us on R.T as 'Jerry'. After he had finished, one of the air-gunners asked quietly, 'What name are we to use if we come up against real Jerries?' For a second there was no reply—evidently no-one had thought of such a contingency—but then the whole crew room rocked with laughter. To come up against a real Jerry during an exercise would indeed be a capital joke! After some discussion it was decided that if we met the Hun we should refer to him as 'bogy' or 'bully'. The word 'Hun' wouldn't be sufficiently distinct on R.T. At the last moment the C.O. gave the order that we should all take more ammunition with us than we had intended.

In the dressing-room next to me one of our most experienced air-

gunners was getting into his flying clothes. He was an airman by profession, had several hundred flying hours to his credit and had been over Germany more than a dozen times. 'It's a bloody job this air-gunnery,' he muttered while pushing his legs into the trousers of his sidcut, 'dangerous and dull. Once the war's over I'll know better than to stick in the service.'

'You're telling me,' a colleague on the other side of the speaker took up the point. 'I wish I knew what made me choose a profession like this. Instead I might be sitting with the wife in our cottage or doing a spot of digging in the garden.'

'Well, that'll come one day,' a third one remarked, 'don't let's think of it now.'

'It's not natural to man', the first one continued as though he hadn't heard the others, 'to live for killin'. You didn't come into the world to spend all your time with a lot of ruddy guns and oily aircraft, thinkin' of nothin' but how to kill the other man, and never certain for a moment whether you won't be the one to fade out. It's not natural, that's what I say, and I don't care a damn who contradicts me.'

'You are right, Ken, it isn't natural. My wife says just the same and she knows what she's talking about. What we ought to be doing now is some decent job of work, on the land or in a factory, or even in an office, and not be livin' like monkeys, going up and coming down and going up again, thinking of nothing but killing, and one day crashing down for good and all. No, it's not natural.'

How right they were. Of course it wasn't natural, and though their words made me feel even more apprehensive than I usually did before a flight, they also filled me with a new sense of gratitude. For the first time since I joined the R.A.F. I realized that I was not an exception; that though possibly more of a coward than others, I wasn't the only one who before going up had that empty feeling in the pit of the stomach, wondering all the while why he had ever chosen so crazy a profession.

My place during the flight was in the nose turret of a Hampden. There was a strong wind and the aircraft bumped heavily. We made frequent changes of formation and each one would force the aircraft into steep dives and sharp banks. I didn't enjoy these violent manoeuvres, but the scenery down below afforded a gratifying recompense. Though, or perhaps because I had no more exacting duties than to scan the sky for enemy aircraft, I allowed myself to be beguiled by the scenery. We were passing over beautiful country, Devonshire and Cornwall. I had been particularly looking forward to seeing again a place that I remembered from my earlier days at Bentley and that I had never since been able to forget. In fact, in the course of the months my memory had turned it into a sort of fairy castle that became the more fairylike the more I thought about it. Often when I felt depressed I only needed to close my eyes and reinvoke the picture of that place and the strange elixir of memory would improve my mood. Was reality likely to be half as alluring as memory? All of a sudden the place was beneath us: a stately white

mansion with two large wings, reminiscent of some Continental chateau; a formal courtyard spread out in front of it, and a park that looked enormous even from three thousand feet above. One of the wings was slightly larger than the other, but this by no means spoilt the fine proportions of the whole structure. The larger wing formed what looked like a private church, white and supported by slender columns as was the rest of the building. For once, reality was not inferior to the vision evoked by the imagination. If anything, the place looked even more fairylike to me than before, the park throwing it more into relief now that it was luscious and green. I drank in the picture with delight and was still under the impression of it when we got back and landed. Everybody was enthusiastic about our trip, and no-one more so than my friends from the dressing-room. I was sure that had I reminded them of what they had said before our flight, they would either have denied that they had uttered it or would have become rude. And I should have sympathized with them, for I felt as elated as they did, even though this time our reasons were not identical.

IV

It is always fascinating to observe when a group of men with an identical aim and identical interests begins to reveal the features of the individuals of which it is composed.

Even before September 1939 the lives of my fellow air-gunners had pivoted round aeroplanes, tactics, and gun-turrets, and during the first few days they appeared to me an impersonal body whose most distinctive feature was its utter contrast to the crowd at Sleethole and the semi-civilian company at Sandfield. Their military bearing, discipline, and professional attitude, and, last but not least, their aversion to gossip, were the characteristics that gave each one of them the identical stamp. Yet for all its essential homogeneity, the crowd at Bentley soon split up into several groups each with its individual face.

To begin with, there were those for whom nothing outside air-gunnery existed. They were the least conspicuous and the quietest members of the course. Their uniforms were stained with oil, well worn, and of a greenish-grey rather than light blue, and their conversation seldom went beyond gun stoppages, tactics, squadron discipline, German methods in combat. Though glad to have been selected for our course, they were impatient to return to their squadrons. The only redeeming feature for them in their absence from 'home' was the prospect of bringing back new professional secrets. Though most of them happened to belong to the youngest section of our crowd and were lads in the mid-twenties, their underlying seriousness and the consciousness of responsibility with which they approached their task were strangely un-English. This was perhaps not surprising, since with one or two exceptions they were all Scottish. In spite of the possible differences in their social and intellectual backgrounds, they formed the most homogeneous group at Bentley and always stuck together. It was inevitable that they should be known as the 'Flying

Scotsmen'. Their knowledge of air-gunnery matters was superior to that of any one of us, not excluding our instructors; nevertheless they took copious notes and followed each lecture as though it dealt with a completely new subject. When a lecture was over, they would explain to one another details of what they had just heard and engage in spirited technical discussions. Among their many endearing features I found the most attractive their genuine modesty, a virtue that usually accompanies true knowledge and expert skill. This modesty stood in amusing contrast to their inherent pride as Scotsmen; but only when a technical argument with their Sassenach colleagues became really heated would you discern a note of aggressiveness in their attitude and guess that in their heart of hearts they regarded all other persons as complete ignoramuses. Such occasions, however, were rare. There was not one among those Scots whom I should not have been proud to call a friend.

I found far less in common with the 'man about town' lot, a group of a dozen men in their late twenties and early thirties. Keen though they all were on air-gunnery, they were not exclusively wedded to it like the Scottish crowd. Whenever opportunity presented itself, they would spend the evening at one of the dancing places in the near-by town; and their frequent telephone calls, whispered conversations, and numerous letters demonstrated the diversity of their interests.

Though he did not make common cause with the gay lot, our only Irishman should really have presided over them. At first I was deeply impressed by his industry, for however many cigarettes he might be smoking—and he was the most inveterate chain smoker I had ever known—and however many sweets he might be consuming, never for a moment, whether in the crew room, during lectures, or in the mess, did he stop writing. He would cover page after page and stop only to light a fresh cigarette or stretch out his exceedingly long legs. It took me some time to discover that what looked like copious work notes were in reality letters to his girl friends. He was only a youngster, very gaunt and plain, yet he appeared to take great pride in his reputation as a real Don Juan. If at some quiet moment, with few people about, you entered the anteroom, you were more than likely to find him deep in a whispered conversation with one of the W.A.A.F.s. But notwithstanding appearances, I suspected that his innumerable romances were nothing more than . . . romances, and that most of his passion went into the writing of letters and basking in the glory of the renown that he had succeeded in establishing for himself.

The opposite pole was represented by the 'old brigade'. They were only in the late thirties, but strangely enough they all looked and behaved as if they were much older than their years. Because of their congenial 'elderly' habits, they were soon drawn to one another and formed a group of their own. In their professional aptitude they were second to none, and I never ceased to admire them for their skill and courage. They were always helpful, always cheerful, and they never grumbled or argued, but there was no denying that they belonged to a different generation. This

may possibly have been due to the fact that they had all been married for a good many years, had children, and, outside their job, had no interests but their distant families. I never knew them leave the camp, and after dinner they would sit together in the anteroom, enjoying their glass of beer and their pipe, and fairly exhaling the atmosphere of middle-aged British respectability. They were as fine a lot of men as any, yet there seemed something incongruous about their being air-gunners.

No R.A.F. station is ever complete without its cranks. On our course we had two. One of them had switched over from administrative to operational duties only at the beginning of the war, yet though he had been an air-gunner for several months, he never appeared to know what was going on on our course, was constantly attaching himself to the wrong squad, and had the disconcerting habit of asking questions without waiting for a reply. Even if he listened to one, he seldom seemed to grasp its sense and stared at you in dull incomprehension. He was the only member of the course whose manners were not beyond reproach, and whose commission, air-gunner's badge, and presence at Bentley seemed to have been due to some clerical or other error on authority's part. Our oddity Number Two, a pleasant, fair-haired youngster, suffered from an almost abnormal inferiority complex, which he tried to hide behind an aggressive manner. Though he worked very hard, he seemed unable to master any particular subject. He rarely succeeded in getting on with the instructors, and by asking them catchy questions which he had looked up beforehand, and at the same time assuming an artfully innocent air, he managed to provoke the enmity of even the most patient among them. Or he would pick up some item ahead of our course and show off in front of us all, the instructor included. His reason for so doing probably lay in his desire to persuade us to treat him with some of the respect to which he felt entitled, but which in the ordinary course of events his colleagues did not feel called upon to show.

The real trials of our two cranks did not begin until the morning parade, which was a function of great importance. On one of the very first mornings the C.O. asked both of them in turn to take over the command of the parade. Neither could remember a single order, and even such enemies as they might have had, felt the utmost pity for them. But whereas Number One appeared to realize the hopelessness of his exhibition, looked uncomfortable, blushed, and finally burst out laughing out of sheer nervousness, Number Two became more and more terrified and in the end seemed on the verge of a nervous collapse. Even the C.O., who normally wouldn't take much notice of the reactions of any individual officer, must have become aware of the unfortunate man's condition, for without saying a word he replaced him by another officer.

V

Some of my friends regarded even the C.O. as something of a crank though of quite a different order. From the very first day it became evident that though his air-gunners shared his high opinion of the S.C. and its important functions, their ideas on how those functions might be most adequately performed were not always identical. With the exception of myself, all the other air-gunners on the course were specially picked men with extensive war-time experience which the C.O., a pre-war pilot, did not possess. The fundamentals of air-gunnery, ballistics, turrets, firing, and all the rest, were naturally familiar to each one of us. Our chief aim at Bentley was to learn and help to evolve certain tactics that were as yet a novelty. We were all burning to do our share and to acquire the new knowledge from which later on our own squadrons might benefit. So all that mattered to us was fire-control and tactics. According to our own interpretation of Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe's methods, however, you could not be an efficient operational air-gunnery leader unless you had gained an impressive bunch of laurels on the parade ground.

On the first morning no-one minded the parade. It only lasted ten minutes; it gave the course the desired ceremonial send-off, and it made us feel rather important. And if our marching wasn't up to the standard of the Guards, well, we weren't in the Guards and were supposed to be specialists whose time and energies had been fully concentrated on the many intricacies of our own profession. The parade, however, was repeated on the second morning and on every following morning and was never limited to the specified ten minutes. On several occasions in fact it lasted for seventy-five minutes and important lectures had to be sacrificed to it. At Sandfield where the officers had been greenhorns with no notion of drill, a similar method would no doubt have produced excellent results. At Bentley it had the opposite effect and was, in fact, the only feature throughout the course that affected its characteristic cheerfulness and harmony.

When on the first morning the C.O. discovered that our standard on the parade ground was not of a very exalted order, he decided that each one of the officers should in turn take command of the parade. If he didn't know how to do it, well, he would have to make a fool of himself in front of his colleagues and of the airmen who paraded with us. If his voice didn't lend itself to bellowing out, 'A-taaan-shunn' in the prescribed long drawl with a shrapnel burst at the end, he would have to repeat the performance a dozen times or more. Only after his voice was more or less gone would the C.O. replace him by 'The next gentleman, please'. If an officer's all-round performance on the parade ground did not quite come up to expectation, which, of course, it never did, the C.O. would address him with the following little speech: 'You do realize, Mr. Black'—never omitting to make his words sound more pointed by referring to the officer as Mr. and

not according him his proper rank—'don't you, that you aren't very brilliant at this sort of thing? I hope you do. For how do you imagine you will be able to lead your air-gunners in battle and be an example to them if you don't know how to give them orders on parade? I should personally be very much obliged if you could find the time to study and rehearse parade orders, and to-morrow I shall be pleased to watch you do it again. Thank you, Mr. Black.' And then Mr. White would be called upon to make a similar fool of himself and to be addressed in the identical words. The C.O. of course did not realize that the tone he adopted and his studied courtesy might possibly not be appreciated by men whose function in the R.A.F. was that of specialists, and who concentrated single-mindedly upon their one exclusive purpose. Or he might have had his own psychological reason for adopting those particular methods. But kindly and understanding though most of my colleagues were, they refused to be much interested in the psychological subtleties of Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe's mind and reacted to them in a manner rather different from that which the C.O. had presumably intended to evoke. In order to limit the daily 'waste of time' to a minimum and get down to our real work, we all did our best to satisfy the C.O.'s demands on the parade ground, yet every morning a sense of irritation was aroused, which was utterly alien to the innate spirit of our team and which took some time to simmer down.

By putting such stress on what was regarded as of only secondary importance and thus creating the quite erroneous impression that he belittled the true purpose of our presence at Bentley, the C.O. robbed the parades of whatever beneficial effects they might otherwise have had. For, in their impatience, my friends interpreted his methods as an implied slur on what they regarded as their only object in life, namely air-gunnery.

For all his possible lack of judgement, I could not help having a certain admiration for 'Ginger-Dud' or, rather, for his unflinching loyalty to his own principles, however much I might disagree with these, and for being so true to type and so deeply convinced of the righteousness of his cause. He had been to Sandhurst and in a smart regiment before he switched over to the R.A.F.; but, in spite of such a background, he suggested to me a Continental martinet rather than an English officer. At the beginning of our course he had given us an address in which he said, 'We in this so-called free country of ours are far too slack, far too individualistic, socialism and democracy have squeezed the true spirit out of our nation. What we need is more discipline, more obedience. What we really want, gentlemen, is some of Hitler's own medicine. I know the fellow is an old bastard, but there's a great deal we can learn from him and from the Germans as a people.'

Ginger-Dud was tall, thin, extremely well groomed, with small, almost feminine hands and feet, and invariably exuded a scent of lavender water. He had wavy, straw-coloured hair and for reading purposes used an eyeglass in a gold rim. He was always accompanied by two sleek whippets, the colour of his own hair. Even their nervous movements and their

long noses suggested a physical affinity with their master. His fondness for dogs naturally made me regard his various idiosyncrasies far more indulgently than did my colleagues. His language was a queer mixture of what the Americans take to be an Oxford accent (me deah fellah) and some of the juicier expressions current among the armourers, both of these allied to an intonation that fiction writers describe as 'county'. An often recurring subject of his after-dinner conversations in the mess was a brother who besides being an M.F.H. was a big noise in the city. Or he would carelessly scatter remarks about his pre-war accomplishments in the hunting field. On a few occasions he set out to show how human and jovial he 'really' was and even cracked a couple of rather *risqué* jokes, but neither the joviality nor the jokes quite came off. He had an excellent brain, was very keen on his job, and hard to beat in an argument. Altogether he was something of a daredevil, and I anticipated that before the war was over he would be an Air Marshal. The one thing that appeared to elude him was how to establish cordiality with his air-gunners. In the majority of messes, among junior officers the tendency existed, however cunningly disguised, to gravitate towards the C.O. At Bentley the opposite was the case, and the junior officers kept deliberately to themselves. It was the C.O. who had to make the first step if he wanted to engage them in conversation.

For anyone with a personality as clearly defined as his, it must have been impossible to set aside his traditions or to view the human side in a modern war with the same open-mindedness with which he approached the technical business. In a camp with new R.A.F. recruits, his methods would have been perfect. They seemed to misfire when applied to specialists who had not only been in the service for many years but had received much of their training under the exacting conditions of actual warfare. Moreover, all these men took a very high view of service matters and were deeply concerned about the discipline of the air-gunners in their own squadrons. Basing their ideas on their very concrete experiences of how discipline in a war-time squadron could be maintained, they knew that suppression of individualism and the appeal to blind obedience was not necessarily the most efficacious method. They knew that a modern operational squadron was held together by a sense of equality and comradeship that could not be enforced from above but had to grow naturally as the result of the effort and the devotion of all concerned. Any reference to these elements of equality and free deliberation was absent from the C.O.'s pronouncements. Occasionally he would say, 'No-one hates all these so-called class distinctions more than I do', and 'We are all one team and must treat the airmen serving under us as our helpers rather than our subordinates', but his tone did not carry the conviction that he really believed in these democratic sentiments. When he heard that in their off hours some of the officers enjoyed friendly chats with the armourers and had on their evening drives to the near-by town given several of them lifts, he treated us to a lecture the gist of which was that to be 'an officer you first have to be a gentleman, and if you are a gentleman you cannot

make friends and be friendly with servants. You can only be the one or the other.'

'If Ginger-Dud had served with an operational squadron', was the comment of one of our flying Scotsmen, 'perhaps he would have learned by now that the days are over when certain blokes regarded the armourers as their servants. Good heavens, my armourers are almost more important to me than my pilot, and many of them are finer gentlemen than the . . . Let him do his lecturing to a squadron at an operational station and he'll never want to do it again.'

VI

For the first fortnight we worked without a break, Saturday and Sunday being treated just as any other day, but at the end of that time we were given forty-eight hours' leave, from noon on Saturday till noon on Monday. No matter how delightful a station might be and how congenial the company, leave was always most acceptable and as soon as I heard the good news I decided to go home. Yet it was doubtful whether I should really be able to get away. I was Gunpost Defence Officer for the night of Saturday to Sunday and had not enough petrol to take me all the way home and back. By train the journey each way would take me the best part of a day.

When on Saturday morning at breakfast I mentioned my difficulties, one of those present remarked, 'I'll gladly replace you on the gunpost to-night. I'm not going away myself.' After my experiences at Sleethole I had decided never again to ask anyone for this sort of service and at first could hardly believe my ears. The speaker, however, was not only quite serious but spoke in the tone of one who was himself requesting a privilege. Before I had had time to thank him, someone else asked, 'How many coupons do you need?' 'About five,' I replied. 'I've still got coupons left over from my last station, you might as well have some of them.' And he pulled out his wallet and handed me coupons for five gallons. I felt something very like a lump in my throat. Of course I knew that there could be no comparison between my friends here and the crowd at Sleethole or the semi-civilian lot at Sandfield, yet their spontaneous offer of help, in matters which demanded on their part genuine self-denial, surprised and moved me. Suddenly I felt that I didn't really want to go home at all and that I should be much happier spending the week-end at Bentley, but before these sentiments had had time to crystallize into a decision, a youngster from the far end of the table inquired, 'Will you be passing anywhere near P——?' and when I said yes, he begged me to give him a lift. So that settled it.

On Saturday morning we had a particularly long flight from which we didn't return till 2 p.m., and, what with having lunch and doing a hundred last-minute jobs, when we finally got away it was almost four. But the weather was fine and the drive enjoyable, even though it was nearly

ten o'clock when I reached Stoughton, peaceful and quiet and getting ready for the night after a hot summer's day. Only the great number of troops along the road, and the new pillboxes and barricades that had sprung up since I had last visited Sussex, reminded me that we were at war, preparing ourselves, possibly, for one of the most decisive battles in history.

At Stoughton there were no men in uniform, no barricades, no army messengers speeding along on noisy motor cycles. I went to bed early, the dogs, tired out after the mad rapture of their welcome, cuddled up peacefully in their baskets in a corner of the room. For a while I deluded myself with the fancy that the comfortable bedroom, the comfortable bed with its smooth sheets, the occasional twitter and flutter of a bird in the trees outside, were all part of my ordinary life, and that gun-turrets and Browning guns and Wellingtons and the whole drama of war existed only on some far-away planet. Yet though the conscious mind had the power to cut out at will anything that did not fit into its vision of the hour, the subconscious must have been too deeply ingrained with what lay beyond Stoughton's horizon to stave off its intrusion. Every half-hour or so I would wake up, my mind heaving with thoughts about the French Navy or the French Colonial Empire, or German bombers, or the gun-sights in my turret. When I had gone to bed I had intended not to get up till nine, but when I awoke at five I was unable to fall asleep again.

In the course of the morning I succeeded in recapturing the peace of the previous evening and in giving myself up completely to the little incidents of the moment: books had to be rearranged, certain papers sorted out, the garden inspected. This latter task was a very sad one: from the walls of the house the creepers, torn from their supports by the gales of the winter, were hanging down in straggling confusion; in the borders, weeds, standing three feet high, were strangling what was left of flowers; and the lawns were knee-deep.

The thing I had been looking forward to most was being able to get some really good sleep. At Bentley the days were always very long; I usually got up at six and from seven-thirty onwards there would follow ten and often more hours of exacting and exhausting work. So on my second night at home I went to bed before nine and fell asleep instantly. It was after midnight when I was awakened by the hum of an aeroplane. Aircraft were flying over Stoughton day and night, and the air was never quite free from their buzz. Yet the sound of that particular aircraft, though very distant and as yet muffled, had cut into my sleep. I turned on the light and for five minutes or so listened to the rhythmical drone. Suddenly there was a loud detonation which shook the whole house. Then there was silence and the hum of the aircraft began to grow fainter, but the explosion had made the handle fall off my bedroom door, and Billfox jumped on to my bed. He threw himself right across my chest, pushing his face under my chin and trembling violently. The expression of fear in his eyes was such as I imagined human eyes alone to be capable of.

Both at Sandfield and at Bentley I had heard bombs and gunfire, but in most instances their sound had come from a great distance or I had experienced them while flying or standing on the aerodrome. Either of these attendant circumstances had made the bombs and the flash of the guns appear a natural part of the general scene; but in the stillness of the peaceful house and with the terrified dogs for company, there was something personal, threatening, and sinister in the sound of that German bomb.

Unable to go to sleep again, I began to read and when by three I still felt wide awake, I took a sleeping draught. I was determined not to be cheated out of my week-end sleep. Before I returned to bed, I first went to the window and drew back the curtain. The sky was beginning to get light and the stars were growing pale. Not a single cloud, not a single sound. The village, the downs, the cows, horses, and birds lay asleep. Strange, how nightmare and reality could exist so close side by side. I went back to bed and Billfox once again sprawled across my chest. When I woke up it was seven. The sky was cloudless and blue and the sun shone strong and hot. The morning symphony of twittering birds, barking dogs, mooing cows, and heavy footsteps of the cowman was being intoned at full blast. At eight I set off for my return journey to Bentley.

VII

At Bentley, two days later, we were awakened before 5 a.m. by men running through the camp with rattles and motor horns. An air raid! For the first time we were forced to leave our beds and rush to the shelters. Half-dressed, everyone hurried to the appointed spot. The sky was of the purest blue, with not a single cloud in it. Most of the officers had merely thrown greatcoats or flying jackets over their pyjamas; a few, myself included, were also wearing flying boots which were warm and easy to slip into; a few were barefoot.

One man alone was fully dressed, with respirator, webbing equipment, revolver, and gloves as though he were on his way to a parade. Needless to say it was Wing Commander Spense, always punctilious, always an example to everyone else, always 'on parade'. How he had managed to be fully dressed, even with collar and tie, was a mystery. Or was it his habit to retire to bed fully dressed? But our immaculate chief—during spring he had been promoted to chief of the S.C.—was evidently determined to offer us more surprises than one, for he suddenly turned towards a near-by flower bed and, saying, 'Even Jerry can't prevent me from relieving myself', proceeded to do so. For a second or two we were all speechless with amazement, but then someone observed, in not altogether subdued tones, 'There's something to be said for the Hun: he makes even Spense human'.

Soon afterwards a formation of some twenty German aircraft passed overhead. Evidently they were not coming to bomb us but the naval base. We remained outside the shelter for half an hour, but before we returned

to our quarters, thick black clouds began to drift in slowly from the sea. There was a distinctly oily smell about them. An oil tanker had been hit.

Parade was as usual at seven-forty-five, but while we were forming close columns of flights and doing our best to make our right inclines and left inclines look irreproachable, another warning sounded and Spense, who in the absence of Ginger-Dud was taking the parade, gave the welcome order, 'Parade dismissed'.

VIII

It was a windless clear day, ideal for flying. I had three flights on my programme, the second one in a Defiant. But I was determined not to make that flight. I was training for Wellingtons and saw no point in wasting my time flying about in a fighter. Moreover, I had embarked upon my air career at the age of forty and doubted whether I would be able to stand the speed and the steep banking of a fighter. The prospect of getting blacked out had little attraction for me, and I was not interested in flying for the mere sake of flying. Even one of my younger colleagues who since the beginning of the war had been flying Hudsons, had been blacked out during a trip in a Defiant. Some of those who heard me express my opposition to the flight chaffed me, declaring that I'd got the wind up, but I took no notice of them, determined to report to the Wingco. Admin. and to ask him for a flight in a bomber instead. What if he refuses? my friends queried. I would tell him that I should never have to fly in a Defiant and that it would be much wiser to let a Defiant air-gunner make the flight instead of me. And if he still refuses? Well, then, in return I should refuse; anyhow, he couldn't force me. We had several Defiant air-gunners on the course who as a rule took only a limited interest in flights in big bombers and always hankered after more practice in Defiants. When I failed to find the Wingco. Admin. one of the Defiant gunners suggested that he would arrange for the change-over.

I went up in a Wellington, and when I returned I heard that 'it was O.K.' and that my second flight, half an hour later, would again be in a Wellington. I remained outside the crew room, settling down on the grass to enjoy the sun. A few minutes later Wing Commander Spense came out of his office, carrying his helmet and parachute and turning towards the Defiant waiting near by. Apparently he was to be the pilot for the flight for which I had originally been detailed. He seemed very pleased with life, for even his proverbially reticent disposition could not deter him from observing, 'What a day for flying', and giving me a grin, something I didn't remember ever having seen him do, a grin, moreover, particularly attractive for being such a rarity.

A few minutes later he took off. I followed his machine with my eyes, but he had hardly left the aerodrome when I saw him turning back. He was flying very low, not more than a hundred feet above the ground, and was heading for the centre of the aerodrome where a big Harrow was just preparing to take off. Engine trouble, I wondered. He was flying slowly,

with the throttle shut completely. When he was only some twenty or thirty feet above the ground I saw to my amazement that he was getting into a steep bank as if to make a complete turn. I got up from the grass to watch him more closely. The banking looked exceptionally slow, but instead of turning, the machine made a complete loop. Before I realized what was happening, the nose of the Defiant buried itself in the ground. A thin black column of smoke shot up into the air, and then something fell out of the plane. It looked like the engine. The whole accident had happened so swiftly, the Defiant had been coming down so gently that, though it was obvious that Spense must have been in trouble, the mind refused to grasp that the incident had ended in a crash.

Dozens of people were running across the aerodrome to the wrecked machine. It was still smoking, but only very slightly, and there were no flames. A warrant officer, sprinting as fast as his legs would take him, shouted, 'Everybody back, everybody back, only ambulance people to advance'. I remained where I was. Many people with presumably much better qualifications for the immediate task than mine were already surrounding the wreckage. Within another two or three minutes the ambulance was hurrying across the aerodrome. Altogether it cannot have been more than five minutes between the accident and the moment of the doctor's arrival at the fatal spot. The ambulance remained there for about a quarter of an hour and then drove off at high speed.

Several of my colleagues and a bunch of armourers had joined me and we all stood in front of the crew room without saying a word. Soon after the ambulance departed, one of the sergeant instructors came from the centre of the aerodrome and joined us. He was pale and there was a tense expression on his perspiring face. 'Poor Wing Commander,' he said, 'I've never seen anything like it. The skull completely smashed and the brain all over the cockpit, everything else twisted and torn. Horrible, simply horrible', and he shook himself as though to get rid of the vision. 'What about Garly?' I asked. 'They can't tell yet, but he seems all right. When they took him out of his turret he was bleeding badly but he was conscious. It was the turret that saved his life.'

Everyone looked more surprised than shocked. The whole incident had seemed so incredible. The sun was shining and you just couldn't believe that a man whom we all had seen half an hour previously and who only on that very morning had for the first time made us laugh, was a twisted shattered corpse. 'It's incredible', everybody continued to repeat, before adding as if an afterthought, 'Poor Spense'. It just didn't seem true.

Spense's loss was a very serious loss to the S.C. He was its head and one of the most brilliant theorists in the service. Many of us had regarded him as *the* S.C. and the person mainly responsible for making our presence at Bentley worth while.

All flying for the day was cancelled. The story of my decision not to fly in a Defiant that morning suddenly spread all over the station and was hailed by many as something in the nature of prophecy. Wherever I

turned during and after lunch I seemed to overhear bits of conversation such as, 'By Jove, he was lucky', 'Wasn't his instinct right?', 'I wonder what made him refuse going up in the Defiant', 'I've always believed in premonitions, telepathy and that kind of thing', 'Say what you will, there are things you simply can't explain'. No-one would believe me when I said that I had had no premonition of any sort or kind and that I had simply regarded the flight as a waste of time and didn't want to get blacked out.

The lectures improvised for the remainder of the day invariably developed into debates as to the most likely causes for poor Spense's death. 'He had engine trouble, I could hear it distinctly.' 'Nonsense, engine trouble! He was flying too low and didn't give himself enough speed.' 'I'm sorry to say,' our Flight Sergeant instructor interrupted, 'the Wing Commander was a brilliant teacher and a wonderful officer but not a very good pilot and he had little experience of Defiants.' Someone tried to defend Spense's prowess as a pilot. 'I think you're wrong there, Flight. What he did was to try to avoid the Harrow that was just going to take off, and he banked without enough speed for it.' But the arguments were not heated. The day seemed flat and without purpose. Though no-one had been on particularly intimate terms with Spense, everyone had held him in high respect and felt sorry both for the man himself and for the S.C. at which he would be irreplaceable.

For the next few days after Spense's death the whole tenor of our course was altered. This was also due to the increasing pace of German air raids. What we needed was concentration and regularity, and the sudden general dislocation was inimical to our efforts. However much the results of our work might in future be of benefit to operational squadrons throughout the country, we were not a fighting unit and our work required steady patient endeavour and not irregular improvisation. With the professional selfishness that seemed inseparable from our keenness, and unaware, even, of the callousness of our attitude, we came to regard both Spense's death and the German raids as impinging upon our legitimate rights at Bentley.

On the day following upon the accident in the Defiant we went up twice in formation but on each occasion the leader of the flight decided to return when German aircraft appeared in the distance. No matter how close we might be to actual warfare, attacking enemy aircraft was not our object and the picture of the war became strangely distorted behind the screen of our own immediate purpose. Everyone was burning to 'play his part' in the battle, yet knew that he could not do so. This conflict, ever present in each one of us, was not propitious to the spirit of patience and detachment that our work demanded.

The work in the armoury was equally unsatisfactory. The C.O. had turned all his attention to Spense's funeral which was to take place on the second afternoon after the accident. So for two days all the armourers and most of the airmen throughout the camp had been called off their normal

duties, spending their entire time learning the special funeral step. For hour after hour the men whose jobs were guns, engines, electric equipment, were drilling on the parade ground. However moving the C.O.'s desire might be to give his departed friend and assistant as impressive a funeral as Bentley could provide, in our mood of the moment, the relentless parading, with the corresponding standstill of every other activity, struck us as verging on the unreal. Surely, we argued among ourselves, Spense, ever anxious that we should get on with our work, would not have minded that he should be accompanied on his last journey by a mere handful of airmen, if thus Bentley's main activities were permitted to continue unaffected. Our sentiments showed a most ungracious spirit, but it was the spirit of men who thought exclusively in terms of their job and of warfare. We should probably have looked upon the whole matter in a mood more appropriate to its human aspect if Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe had with a single word tried to make us see the position in the light in which he himself viewed it.

On the morning of the funeral the C.O. intensified still further the sense of opposition on the part of his air-gunners. At the time we thought it was lack of insight, but later we realized that it must have been due to shock caused by the loss of his most valuable collaborator. The ways in which a sudden shock may manifest itself are manifold, and it was only our own blindness at the time that prevented us from recognizing one of these for what it was. Anyhow, we had the usual parade at seven-forty-five, and at eight an important lecture on tactics, our most cherished subject, was to begin. Under the stress of events, Ginger-Dud seemed in a particularly critical mood, and nothing we could do met with his approval. We didn't form columns quickly or cleanly enough; we didn't shout our orders sufficiently loudly; we didn't swing our arms as vehemently as he wished us to do. When eight o'clock came he pretended not to hear the whistle and continued the parade. At eight-thirty the station sirens sounded. Whenever Spense had taken the parade previously and a raid had been signalled, he had dismissed us. So, once again, we expected to be dismissed. But the C.O. pretended not to have heard the sirens, and the parade continued. A few minutes after the warning had sounded, we could hear the drone of aeroplanes and immediately there appeared overhead a formation of Junkers 87's. They were flying from east to west, slightly south of us, and for the moment you could not tell whether their objective was our aerodrome—a particularly famous one and well known to the Germans—or some other target. The parade went on. It no doubt provided an excellent opportunity for the exercise of self-discipline in the face of possible danger, but, except for myself, the officers taking part in the parade had had more experience of danger in war-time than anyone else on the aerodrome: practically every one of them had taken part in combats with the enemy and they had the contempt of every genuine operational man for heroics and showing off. Like every man who has faced real danger, they hated taking unnecessary risks.

Danger in battle yes, that was their daily bread; but danger without reason or purpose, was for them sheer folly. To expose themselves to German bombs without need seemed to them in their impatient mood of the moment more in tune with Hollywood than with actual warfare. Had the C.O. instead of looking at the arms and legs of the parading officers, paid some attention to their faces, the expression in most of their eyes would possibly have told him what the true sentiments of his charges were.

When the parade ended an hour after it had begun, Ginger-Dud was in a far better mood than he had been an hour previously. 'We'll show the fellahs what it means to be an officah', the two whippets, sitting attentively at the far end of the parade ground, seemed to be saying.

Our instructors being detailed from nine onwards for funeral drill, the armoury being closed, and no members of our course having been invited to the funeral or the church service in a near-by town, we were left to ourselves throughout the day. The camp seemed deserted. Most of Bentley's permanent officers, N.C.O.s, and airmen had left soon after the morning parade and they did not return till three when the dead man's ashes were to be scattered over the sea. As we had not been asked to attend that ceremony either, we remained just outside the crew room from which, without being seen ourselves, we could yet watch the final stage in Spense's journey.

Two files of airmen, their rifles turned towards the ground, were forming a passage leading from H.Q. to the Wellington waiting at the edge of the airfield. The aerodrome, which normally was an exceptionally busy one, with the drone of aircraft and the incessant noise of hammering in the hangars, appeared particularly silent. From the sea the black oily clouds were still rolling in. Wing Commander Fielding, our chief administrative officer and a friend of Spense's, was to scatter the ashes from the plane. A solitary figure, he was standing under the wings of the Wellington, waiting for the casket. Half-way between him and ourselves was a little group consisting of Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe, Spense's young wife, and a few other mourners. At half-past three the adjutant stepped from H.Q. carrying the casket in both hands. It seemed to be made of china or terracotta. The troops presented arms, and the adjutant advanced carefully and slowly through the narrow passage formed by the airmen. When he reached the aircraft, he handed the casket over to Fielding who saluted and then took the casket into his own hands.

Carrying the casket with care and reverence, Fielding slowly climbed the ladder leading to the cockpit. At that moment the propellers began to turn and the roar of the engines broke the silence. The Wellington shook once or twice as if coming to life, and then began to glide smoothly over the grassy surface of the aerodrome. Its speed increased with each second, and gently its wheels left the ground. Hardly ever had I seen a more perfect-looking take-off. In a slow ascent the aircraft headed for the sea. The young widow stood motionless, following with her eyes the gradually

dwindling machine. Soon it was nothing but a speck in the blue sky. But from the sea the black clouds rolled on and on, and the air still tasted of oil. I returned to the crew room to avoid seeing Mrs. Spense's face. On her way back she had to pass the place where we had been standing.

IX

On the morning following the funeral all work was resumed, and quite early we started on one of our longest and most complicated formation flights. My own post was in the nose turret of the leading Wellington. Above the naval base the black clouds of burning oil were still billowing out from the burning tanker. But before I had had time to take in the picture, I heard through my R.T. earpieces, 'Tallyho, Tallyho', and then the words indicating Jerry's position. Yes, there they were, Junkers 87's, attacking ships in the harbour. They dived impressively, almost vertically, straightening out only when you thought they were going to crash into the sea. But just before they came out of the dive, little white objects left them and then sailed downwards.

Had my chance come at last? I couldn't have said whether I felt excited, even though I knew that I felt tense, more so, in fact, than I remembered ever having done before. Apart from that tenseness, my mind must have been blank. For had any thoughts passed through it, or had I experienced any particular emotion, either would no doubt have made some imprint upon my memory. Yet when immediately after landing I tried to recall my reactions during that first tense moment, there was no single one that I could recollect. The little I did must have been done quite automatically. I pulled up my gloves more tightly, as usual when I wanted to get a better grip on the two gun-handles. I released the safety catch and made sure that my ammunition belt was not jamming; and then I kept my eye pressed to the gun-sight and my finger to the trigger as no doubt the other twenty-four air-gunners in the formation were doing.

But my tension was wasted. Jerry naturally showed no desire to attack what must have looked to him a pretty formidable formation of bombers. And as his job was to dive-bomb ships, so our job was not to attack him but to fire our guns only in self-defence. And whatever his private feelings may have been, the leader of our formation knew only too well that he wasn't allowed to risk nine precious bombers merely to satisfy the blood-thirst of his air-gunners. Had Jerry arrived under the protection of fighters, we might have been attacked; but without them, the Junkers must have been grateful when they discovered that we sailed by indifferently, though separated from them by less than a mile. As soon as they had released their bombs, they turned towards the sea and no more was seen of them. Only after we had returned to Bentley did I realize that I had neither been scared nor nervous. Yet before each flight of the preceding week, the thought of a possible encounter with German aircraft had been wont to fill me not only with excitement but also with apprehension.

X

DIARY

In less than a week's time our course will have come to an end. Up till now Bentley has never encouraged me to give much thought to my future. Except for the daily visits of the Hun, this course has been so fascinating and the company so inspiring that it has been easy to live entirely in the present without care for the morrow. But to-day our normal rhythm has been upset and there is time for stocktaking and speculation.

Every day the German raids had become more numerous, and the nearby naval base had no air protection whatsoever. This unsatisfactory state of affairs has fortunately come to an end: for the last twenty-four hours aircraft and pilots of two Spitfire squadrons have been arriving from the north in a steady stream. Many of our own officers have had to evacuate their bedrooms to make room for the Spitfire boys. Their new sleeping quarters are in tents erected on the lawns in front of the mess. The constant raids and the arrival of the fighters—many of whom have on several occasions already gone into action—have inevitably dislocated the tenor of our normal life. The C.O. has decided that in view of the many air battles fought quite close to us throughout the day, it would be unwise to send out our usual large formation; and since most of our lectures have come to an end, there has been universal uncertainty as to the nature of our activities, and little work done. I do not envy Dudley-Widicombe and the authorities, for it cannot be an easy problem for them to decide what to do with us or, in fact, with the whole of our station. For an organization doing our sort of work it is unwholesome to be situated right on what looks like becoming our air front line. Yesterday the Chief of Air Staff and a bevy of Air Marshals arrived for conferences that lasted for most of the afternoon. After dinner gossip in the mess had it that the S.C. would be evacuated to Canada; others spoke of Wales. But no-one, apparently not even Ginger-Dud, knew what was really going to happen. The authorities feel nervous about leaving us here, exposed as we are to concentrated German bombing; but their anxiety is perhaps not so much for our safety as for that of our valuable collection of latest aircraft and experimental gear.

As for the future of the air-gunners on the course, it transpired during the last week that we are earmarked to act as chief gunnery officers and instructors to air-gunners in operational squadrons. This is the sort of job that I shall relish with all my heart. It will mean being in contact as much with the men as with the officers, teaching others, and concerning oneself not merely with the technical side of the job but with the more human one and that of morale as well. It sounds, in fact, the very type of job which Kellett talked to me about some months ago. There will be occasional operational flights, but only in major actions, and, altogether, a far more even balance between physical and mental work than has been possible to achieve during the last two months. There isn't a single job in our entire war effort that I should enjoy more, and I believe I'm ready for it.

At the very beginning of my course at Bentley I made an application to

the Air Ministry to be posted to Manhill, and 941 Squadron have made a similar request. How will the authorities react? A few days ago the C.O. told me that during his recent visit to the Air Ministry he heard some rumour that I had been chosen as chief air-gunnery instructor to the Poles at Nottings. Though I should prefer to serve with a British squadron, I should not object to Nottings. Even more than my previous experiences, the last few weeks have shown me the full fascination of my present job and so, naturally, it is the job alone that matters. Moreover, to whatever station I am sent, I shall be dealing with operational men only, and thus be removed from the atmosphere of intrigue with which so many members of the 'special and administrative' branch seem to surround themselves. Whatever difficulties I had whilst working with the Poles arose in connection with a few of their senior officers; and as a gunnery officer I should have little to do with any of these.

Only two months ago the prospect of joining General Dobry and Group Captain Milder seemed very attractive to me. To-day the very idea of exchanging my present straightforward life for the political ice-skating of yet another liaison or staff job is too unbearable to be contemplated.

XI

The last few days before the exam afforded several more opportunities for formation flights. For we had discovered that with their customary methodical habits the Huns always raided at the same time, namely before seven in the morning, then again between nine and ten, during lunch, and then again after six, and finally before 10 p.m., when it was getting dark. So by flying in the morning between ten and lunch-time, and in the early afternoon, we were more or less certain of enjoying a few undisturbed hours during which several hundred miles could be covered and much work done.

On the day before the exam the adjutant informed me that a signal had arrived about my posting: I was to go straight to Nottings as chief air-gunnery officer with the Poles. Though this meant that my application for Manhill had been turned down, I didn't mind. The Poles wouldn't need me for ever, and if I did my job with them well the Air Ministry would not be likely to turn me down again for 941 Squadron. The last few months seemed to have taught me the lesson of patience and I no longer contemplated my future in the service in terms of a few brief months. I knew the British C.O. at Nottings, a delightful man with whom I had got on very well during his visit to Sleethole. I decided, however, to apply for leave before joining Nottings. I had had week-ends but not a whole week's leave since I first joined up, so I wrote at once to the C.O. at Nottings. Next evening the following telegram arrived, 'Your posting to Nottings has been cancelled so regretfully cannot grant you leave.' What did it mean? On the following morning I went to H.Q. to inquire about my posting. The adjutant produced a signal that had arrived the preceding evening. It confirmed that my posting to Nottings had been cancelled.

Were they going to send me to Manhill after all? The adjutant thought that this was the true explanation, but I mistrusted counter-orders in the service. They usually meant something unpleasant, and a shadow lay across my last few days at Bentley.

XII

The exam was far less terrifying than it had been at Sandfield. I was top in tactics, good in all technical subjects, and exceedingly poor in the mechanism of the cine-camera gun which I had always regarded as of secondary importance. Officially, Bentley had transformed me from an ordinary air-gunner into a gunnery leader.

Part of our exam on tactics was a ten-minute lecture. One among its elementary subjects was 'Guiding Principles in Conduct of War'. In accordance with our official manual on the subject, something on which several lectures had been given and to which we had devoted much time, there were eight fundamental principles in all warfare. They were: maintenance of aim, surprise, concentration, security, co-operation, mobility, economy, and offensive. During the lecture each one of those aims had to be explained in terms of aerial warfare and illustrated by apposite examples. To me this was one of the most interesting subjects in our entire course. While it had to be treated strictly in accordance with our technical knowledge of air warfare, at the same time it allowed for a more personal approach than any of the purely technical subjects which left little if any scope for individual thought.

The following is the text of the lecture on 'the eight fundamental principles in warfare' given by, what might have been described, our crank Number Three, and taken down by me word for word:

'Gentlemen. We are told that maintenance of aim is the most important element in warfare and, if I may say so, I entirely agree with this. If it weren't so we shouldn't know, no we shouldn't know, what we are fighting for and might forget that aim. And in wartime there can be no forgetting. But if a fellow knows that his aerodrome is bombed out of existence and perhaps his family too, and the kiddies, he can forget the war completely and simply think of nothing else but smacking the other fellow back. What I always say is, hit the other fellow back as hard as you can, and this brings us to the second point, that of offensive. Now you all know that if two chaps have an argument it is no good arguing and beating about the bush: just get hold of the other chap and smack him, and who hits hardest has won the battle, which means has won the argument, which brings us back to our first point, of maintenance of aim. When I said hit, I meant hit all the time, don't give the other fellow a chance of hitting you back, keep at him, attaboy. You know that your families and your kiddies may be starving and your aerodrome bombed out of existence, and if we had started doing this to Jerry in September 1939 we should know now what our aim in this war is. I suppose our Air Minister and the

Chief of Staff and all the others, they know what it is all about and how to play the game, but a fellow like myself doesn't, and fellows like you don't, and this brings us to the element of surprise, because Hitler knew all the time what he wanted, and when he occupied Norway and then again Holland and all the rest, he knew what he was after and so he surprised us. So what I always say is, surprise the enemy before he can surprise you and go on surprising him, with new inventions and new aeroplanes and new guns and new aerodromes and new bomb-sights and . . . yes, and all the rest, and hit him, hit him hard. And this brings us to concentration. You must concentrate on hitting your enemy, and when you know that your families and your kiddies may be starving and your aerodrome is bombed out of existence you simply concentrate all your aeroplanes and your bombs and attack him in one spot only, one spot I say. Which brings us to economy of force, which means you mustn't put all your eggs into one basket, if I may say so, but must keep a certain reserve in hand. It wouldn't take us far if we sent all our machines over Germany and worked the pilots and air-gunners like niggers day after day and night after night, and brought them home half-dead. That wouldn't be cricket, would it? So what I say is, economy and all the rest. Which brings us to mobility. Because if your force cannot move quickly, when your aerodrome is bombed out of existence and your families are starving you cannot get away quickly and go to another aerodrome, can you? And so there will be no economy, and you must build more and more aerodromes and aeroplanes if you want to hit the other fellow hard. Which brings us to co-operation or, no, I think security comes first. And, if I may say so, it is right that it should be so, because there must be security, and we were told by our instructors, both moral and physical security: anti-aircraft guns and machine-guns and troops and enough air-gunners and all the rest, and I should, of course, have said air-gunners first, but never mind. And moral security is, I suppose, what the Minister for Air and the Air Chief Marshals and the rest are thinking about all the time and we have no reason not to trust them and their judgement. I am sure I speak in all your names if I now express our warmest thanks for their valuable co-operation. I am sure you will agree that we owe them a very great debt. This then disposes of moral and physical security, and before I finish my lecture I must mention the last point, maintenance of aim, sorry, I meant of course co-operation. Because you will all know from your own experience in squadrons that there must be *esprit de corps* and the goodwill of the troops, whom we must not treat as our subordinates but rather as our helpmates and all being one team and playing the game; and if you haven't the goodwill of the troops there is no discipline or *esprit de corps*, and, if I may say so, respectfully of course, I am surprised that we were not given as an additional point, that is to say point nine, yes, we have had eight points already, haven't we, yes, point nine, discipline, because I think in our service there must be discipline because our country expects it from us, and when our families and our kiddies are bombed out of existence and our aerodromes are starving, beg pardon, the other way

round, but I'm sure you know what I mean, and what I mean to say is that when we are all bombed out of existence and all the rest, there must be discipline because otherwise we cannot win the war. And this brings me to the end of my lecture, and I hope I have been able to enlighten you on the important subject of principles of warfare, for which, I am sure, we are all very grateful to our instructors and the Commanding Officer, Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe, to whom, I am sure on all your behalf, I take great pleasure in expressing our warmest thanks for all he has done for us.'

XIII

Our course finished at lunch-time on Saturday. Everyone was returning to his own squadron except me. No new signal had arrived from London and I was left in the dark. Since Nottings' C.O. had been unable to give me leave and since I had no immediate duties I asked Bentley's C.O. for a week's leave but, in view of the uncertainty of my situation, he would grant me forty-eight hours only. 'I'll send you a telegram if I hear that I can give you more, but I expect you'll be wanted urgently at your next station,' he added. My friends who were all rejoicing at the thought of returning to their squadrons realized the mood I was in and expressed their sympathy. 'Don't you worry; Air Ministry are probably making sure that there is a vacancy for you at Manhill,' they tried to console me. How I should have loved to go with them!

I decided to spend my forty-eight hours' leave in London where I should have an opportunity to call at the Air Ministry.

I meant to leave Bentley soon after lunch, but at the last moment my antiquated car broke down and for two hours I watched the helpful mechanics in M.T. section trying to cure its ailments. When all their efforts had failed I decided to catch the last train to London. In a frantic rush I had to unload my car, crammed to the roof, and put the luggage in the taxi hurriedly summoned from the nearest town. Not having packed my things for a railway journey, by the time I had settled down in the train, half the compartment was littered with my belongings. Besides my two suitcases and the typewriter, I carried my greatcoat and raincoat, a flying suit, a loose fur lining, long flying gloves, flying boots, gum boots, flying helmet with goggles and earpieces, a revolver, respirator, sleeping bag, oxygen mask, photo camera, several bulky manuals on air-gunnery, and a box of cigarettes. By the time I had distributed my possessions on every available inch of free space, the compartment had assumed the appearance of Bentley's equipment section on a particularly busy day.

Fortunately only two naval officers shared the compartment with me so no argument about *lebensraum* arose, but their somewhat dubious glances in my direction were suggestive of a variety of sentiments evoked by the astounding opulence of the junior Service as symbolized by their new fellow traveller. In my mood of the moment, however, I was pleased

to interpret both their glances and their sentiments as admiration and, even envy, rather than anything less flattering. And warmed by such reading of their response, I felt snug, pleased with myself and life in general, and increasingly sleepy.

By the time I woke up we were at Waterloo. It took me some time to gather together the litter of my possessions and to pass these on to the porter on the platform, but one of my fellow travellers waited patiently until this lengthy transaction had been completed. Only when at last I was ready to leave the compartment did I hear his voice. 'Don't leave your football behind, you may need it', he observed with what sounded to me like studied politeness, and handed me my flying helmet, squashed to a round shape and left by me unheeded on the floor under my seat. Well, that's one to the Navy, I felt, and debated for a second whether to express my thanks with an equally deliberate courtesy, or simply to say nothing. But then I caught the Lieutenant-Commander's eye and we both broke into hilarious laughter, which, not unnaturally, left the porter somewhat nonplussed.¹

¹ This railway journey is treated in greater detail in the story 'The Football' in my recent book *The Brother Vane*.

Book Four

BRIEF INTERLUDE

I

Early on Sunday morning I took a train for Bentley to collect my car. I returned in it to London in the late afternoon and found a telegram awaiting me. It was from Group Captain Dudley-Widicombe. 'Seven days' leave granted.' I sent a wire to an old friend with a job in the Navy up in the north of Scotland to ask whether it would suit him if I came to spend my leave with him. He wired back 'Yes', and I decided to set out for Scotland on Monday night.

On Monday morning I visited a friend who was employed at the Air Ministry and who obligingly took me from room to room in an effort to ascertain particulars about my forthcoming posting. But no-one seemed to know anything definite. 'You are going as chief gunnery officer to the Poles, aren't you?' I was told in one room. 'I've heard something about your joining 941 Squadron,' another officer informed me. 'I seem to have seen some minute with your name on it. Weren't you going to Scotland?' a third one asked me. 'Yes, I am going to Scotland,' I replied; 'as a matter of fact, I'm going to-night, but merely on leave.' 'H'm, I thought you had a staff job in Group H.Q. somewhere up there.' Well, I wasn't much the wiser after my visit than I had been before it, but my friend at the Ministry promised to send me news to Scotland if in the course of the week he should hear anything.

II

On my way back from the Ministry I met, or rather, was stopped in the Strand by two former colleagues from Sleethole. They were in company of what looked to me like an elderly navvy, and all three of them were drunk.

'How de do, how de do,' one of them exclaimed loud enough for every passer-by to hear. 'If that isn't good old, now what's your name, you son of a bitch, yes, good old, how de do. I say, aren't you an Air Marshal yet? I say, hm, I say, old man, I always thought you'd soon be an Air Marshal, didn't I, Charlie?' he turned to one of his companions.

Drunks invariably reduce me to a state of helplessness, and I made a feeble effort to get away. But the speaker got hold of a button of my tunic and the navvy of my arm.

'Don't talk so wet, Fred, you're drunk, hump, drunk, I say,' Charlie stepped in. 'But isn't he lookin' smart? What a swell, hump, creases in trousers, creases in sleeves, hump, here's one to the Air Marshal!'

I felt more and more embarrassed and didn't in the least know what to do. 'Listen, mate,' the navvy, the least drunk of the lot put his lips to my ear, 'I know a place, just round the corner, where they let you have a weeny drink before opening time. Come on, I'll stand you one.'

I tried to think fast and came to the conclusion that an unheroic escape by force was the only solution. So I disentangled myself vigorously without even attempting to give an excuse, and jumped into the nearest taxi, to prevent the three men from trying to catch up with me.

III

During my stay in London I went to one luncheon and one dinner 'party', the sort of social occasions the very existence of which I had almost forgotten. At both functions my fellow guests were men 'of importance', at any rate in their own eyes: a junior member of the Cabinet, several staff officers from the War Office, one or two 'big' men in the City, and several members of Parliament. The greater part of the conversation consisted of the following type of gossip: 'I rang up the Under-Secretary and he promised John should be transferred to X Department', 'I'm lunching with Brigadier Jones to-morrow and I'll mention Harry to him', 'Z promised that he would accept Evan if his boss releases him', 'I'll do what I can, but as you can imagine the "old man" is frightfully busy just now, but I dare say I can get round him and make him find something for Daphne'. The proportion of the war seemed reduced to the area stretching from Whitehall across Westminster to Belgravia and Mayfair, with my fellow guests feverishly erecting bridges across which their friends could reach the niches specially provided for them. I had read about this sort of wangling in books dealing with the first world war, but it had all sounded too exaggerated to produce the impression of reality. How true to life such accounts must have been, I now realized. Yet if there was one popular reaction to be expected during the second world war it was that of a greater idealism. Surely *our* war offered no excuses to anyone not to identify himself wholly with its prosecution, and to regard it merely in terms of personal advantage.

'We're fighting this war for self-preservation and to keep the Empire intact', one of the War Office men tried, however, to enlighten me, apparently expressing the views held by most of those present. 'Just as in the last war, fighting for Christian civilization, democracy, and all that, is pure eyewash. It's right that the newspapers should talk like that and make people believe it's true, but don't imagine for a second that it's more than window dressing.' Since the speaker was a brigadier with many ribbons across his chest, I didn't feel that it would have been politic for me to contradict. Had I been a civilian I might have tried to tell him something about the idealism and the spirit of sacrifice on the part of our airmen and presumably of our sailors and soldiers as well. I might have told him that they gave all they had because they *did* believe that the eyewash about Christian civilization was real; because even though they might not

always have been articulate in expressing their views, they knew in their hearts that they were fighting for more than merely material survival and a physical Empire. I would have told him that in my own conversations extending over a period of nine months and over many of the counties of England, in trains, villages, on aerodromes, I had never encountered any other convictions than those expressed by people profoundly stirred, ready to make every sacrifice, irrespective of what this might mean to the position in which Jack, Tom, or Daphne might or might not find themselves.

'We can only beat Germany on land,' another of my dinner companions philosophized about the war, 'yet how can we with our paltry thirty or forty divisions ever dream of doing so against their two hundred and fifty?' 'You're quite right,' someone else took up the argument, 'how can we win the war so long as the muddle throughout the country continues, and we try to make childish compromises between compulsion and a voluntary system?' 'With our shipping losses mounting from week to week,' yet another added his pennyworth of wisdom, 'we're bound to have starvation by next spring, and God help us, once the populace goes about with empty bellies and begins to revolt.' This then was the sort of perspective in which these important men 'in the centre' of things, viewed the war.

I was certainly not blind to the imperfections of our system and to the wire-pulling of privileged sucklings, but I knew equally well that war was bound to produce such phenomena, and not in Britain alone. And if there was one thing I was certain of, it was that Britain would win the war, not thanks to the superannuated men and women who had drifted into comfortable war jobs because they felt an irrepressible urge to throw their weight about, but to the unknown men and women on aerodrome and in factory, in village and submarine. It would be won not because of the high priests of the red tape, whether in Whitehall or the R.A.F., but in spite of them. It was precisely the 'important' people between Westminster and Mayfair who had once been wont to accept invitations to the Nürnberg Partei Tag, and earnestly expatiated when they returned upon the grandeur of the Nazi achievement, and then in September 1939 had suddenly discovered that their eager visits to the German paradise had been prompted merely by their desire to understand the Nazi danger. It was precisely those 'important' people—not all of them, of course, but quite enough to influence the views of those who mattered—who preached the gospel of compromise with the devil, and found extenuating circumstances for every crime committed in the name of German 'regeneration'. It was they who had broadcast throughout the land the German gospel of the degeneracy of the British; but it was not they who played a real part in proving to the world the foolishness of that gospel. In a war which also meant national reawakening, and in which there could be no place for pretence and compromise, the arid vacuum in which they lived counted for nothing. The unknown warrior it was who mattered—as he always had done—and with him the few dozen men at the very top, in the councils of state and in the various armed and other national services,

men who worked fifteen hours a day, who were determined to make the whole bloody business a success, and who were unconcerned about your views or mine.

However limited my London impressions of the 'important' world may have been, I had had sufficient experience of it to know that they were not altogether exceptional. But though those few social occasions had left me depressed, they produced one supremely satisfying effect. They made me feel more grateful than ever that I had escaped from the more 'theoretical' and administrative side of the war effort and had joined those who were doing the actual fighting. Whatever job I might be given as an air-gunner, it was bound to keep me among men who were not 'important' and could not boast of 'first-hand' information or influential connections in Whitehall or Mayfair.

IV

Having never been to Scotland before, I was looking forward to my journey as to something more than just an ordinary holiday, and was determined to enjoy every moment of it. Already in the train fate was kind, for instead of finding myself in a crowded compartment, as I had feared I might, I shared it all the way with only one fellow traveller, a Pilot Officer from New Zealand. My companion seemed possessed of all the easy and natural charm that I had come to associate with airmen from his country. In common with the majority of them, he had little of the all too hearty exuberance of some of our Australian colleagues; was easier to get on with and more responsive than the English; and more flexible and less dour than some of our Scottish friends. He loved the R.A.F., he loved Britain, he had loved his leave in London, and he loved going back to his squadron in the Shetlands, and he made you feel that life was a wonderful adventure and immensely worth while. When we finally said good-bye I felt as though I had known him for months and not for a few hours only.

DIARY

There is something very soothing about this grey little town, though it is rather ugly and makes few demands upon one's curiosity or aesthetic susceptibilities. The only street worth the name runs through its entire length and boasts of two rows of one-storied houses built of grey stone. Many of them display prominently such inn signs as 'No drinks', 'Temperance Hotel', 'Teetotal Establishment'. Parallel to the street is a loch, half open sea, half estuary, sounding like faraway thunder. On the other side and some way off, the street is flanked by mountains, their low summits lost in mist. Altogether the place might be a somewhat austere version of a placid townlet on the coast of Normandy.

During the first day the quiet of this place seemed strange, almost disturbing; but then I remembered that, during leave in Sussex, Stoughton too had always evoked a similar reaction. What struck me so forcibly at home

and still does, is the coexistence side by side of the reality of war and the illusion of peace. For is it not an illusion? Germany's Tag may not yet have descended upon us, but for the last fortnight there has hardly been a day when I haven't seen German dive-bombers swoop down relentlessly, releasing their toy-like white bombs; when I haven't watched Spitfires and Hurricanes dance and swirl in gruesome frolics, chasing German bombers and challenging enemy fighters; when the sound of bursting bombs and the sight of clouds and flames (and some aircraft in the air rolling over, at first gently and then more and more rapidly, before shooting down, a tail of black smoke trailing behind and painting a final exclamation mark between heaven and the earth beneath) hasn't brought the reality of war very near indeed. Yet the predominant reality of this place is its peace. What only a few days ago seemed superlatively real has become a mere nightmare. Which of the two represents truth, I continue to ask myself. Surely not both. I know that though the vision in the skies of Bentley was real enough, the far-flung moors and the rivers flowing to the sea and the purple of the heather and the cry of the seagulls and the steadfast gait of the Scottish people about me are every bit as real, and that that other thing above Bentley cannot have been more than a dream, possibly conjured up by our sins of the past. But even more: though we ourselves may be destroyed by the dream, no dictator in the world, no barbaric Hun, will ever stem the flow of the rivers and the tides of the sea or the bird's flight. I find some comfort in this thought. For however much I must guard against forgetting that at times evil dreams can become more potent than reality, the truth remains that in the last resort they are as grains of dust swept away by the wind.

V

DIARY

Ever since I arrived in Scotland it has never stopped raining, and the rain is so violent that it is difficult to walk. But I don't mind this. I came here to enjoy long hours of sleep and to spend a few days with B. Since the beginning of the war old friendships have certainly assumed a new value. Once we have passed thirty-five, we discover that it is practically impossible to make new friends. 'The older we grow,' Hilaire Belloc once wrote, 'and the better we can sift mankind, the fewer friends we count, although man lives by friendship.' That this business of friendship is something both strange and important has seldom been clearer to me than during these few days in Scotland. Perhaps war sharpens our susceptibilities and brings home to us truths that we may have known all our lives, without comprehending them fully. Both B. and I realize that we may possibly never see each other again, and often during the last few days it has been as though we were trying to race against time, exchanging bits of information of many months. 'Did you know that Ronald was reported missing in France?' 'Did I tell you what happened to Mary?' 'Wasn't it dreadful about Tom being killed a week after his wedding?' 'And poor Jack . . . and poor . . . ' And so on and so forth, tossing to and fro fragments of news which for all

their pathos had really become as meaningless to ourselves as the pages of last year's newspaper.

I knew, and I know that B. knew, that there were many other things, more intimate, or perhaps, more impersonal, that clamoured to be said. Was this not in all probability the last opportunity to say them? Yet neither of us seemed able to put them into words. But then B. would get up and put on a gramophone record of a Brahms Concerto or a Beethoven Quartet and all that we had been too shy or too incompetent to put into words would suddenly be expressed with the clarity that only the genius of the composer was able to evoke. I have always admired B. for the subtlety of his intuition, which in its spontaneity amounts almost to artistic genius. Without apparently being conscious of doing so and without using words he will convey what the particular moment may demand. My own occasional torrents of words express not one-hundredth part of what he puts into a sudden silence or the lifting of an eyebrow.

These last few days have made me realize how different peace-time values are when compared with their war-time counterparts. It is as if they had lost most of their former meaning and as if our entire existence had been translated to a different dimension. Both friendship and home have always meant a great deal to me. Most of my colleagues complain that their aerodromes are so far away from their homes, yet though I too have invariably served a long way from my home, I never minded this much. The proximity of one's home would seem neither to add nor detract from the sense of contentment brought about by a particular station or the work to be done there. In the service, old associations or values appear to count for little.

What seems to apply to the question of one's home is even more relevant in regard to friendship. When I first joined up, I looked forward to making new friends, and not merely acquaintances. In several instances I seemed to be just on the way to success, only to discover that in the R.A.F. friendship was practically impossible. The establishment of a true friendship requires much cultivation and therefore time. In the R.A.F., as soon as you have succeeded in laying the first foundations for such a relationship, either you or the other person is posted to some aerodrome hundreds of miles away and you may never meet again. Or, what is far worse, you may have just established a new friendship and a week or a month later you find your friend's name among those reported 'killed in action'. Having learned from both kinds of experience, I have become chary of trying to make real friends in the R.A.F.

On the other hand, however perfect may have been the sense of comradeship that I appreciated so much at Bentley, it did not represent friendship in the true sense of the word, for friendship is a relationship between single individuals. The bond that held us together at Bentley did not originate in any particularly personal sense of sympathy and understanding. What had forged links between us was our sharing of identical aims and interests. We were colleagues and comrades but not friends. So to-day I discover, not without alarm, that the experience of the last few days makes me look upon

the war more critically than I have ever done since September 1939, for the war is evidently undermining one of the most precious among the personal values in life, namely that of friendship. It is not my leave, not the peace of this little town, but the consciousness of a human relationship, of something which, as I recognize now, I have been deprived of throughout this year, that has made the last few days so precious. The sense of community born of the fellowship to be found in the service belongs to an altogether different order. For while the personal joys of a service existence depend upon submission and depersonalization of self, those of peace enable the individual self to assert itself, and are thus related to the spirit's innermost core. And so while the prospect of my departure in a few hours' time makes my heart heavy, I am grateful that in spite of war I should have been able to enjoy an experience that would seem to be the exclusive privilege of peace-time.

VI

I returned to London on Saturday night, two days before my leave expired, for I feared that it might take me some time to discover what my new job was to be. I found no message awaiting me and when I rang up H.Q. at Bentley I was informed that no signal from the Air Ministry had arrived there either. They ordered me, however, to remain in London so that any news might instantly be communicated to me. Finally, I rang up my friend at the Air Ministry and he asked me to call on him on Monday morning. He had heard nothing in the meantime. So for yet another day I could indulge myself by living in the atmosphere, half real and half illusory, that always seemed to envelop leave.

VII

Even my last Sunday in London was not quite free from that dual character which made it difficult for me to distinguish clearly what was relevant to the one predominant reality of the moment—the war—and what was not. During my previous visit to the Air Ministry I had come across an officer who in the past had been connected with the Polish show and whom I had occasionally met at conferences dealing with Sleethole. As it happened, on the last occasion we had a lengthy talk in the course of which we discovered that we both shared certain private interests. The Squadron Leader asked me whether I had ever assisted at a service of the religious community headed by a Bishop Alfieri. On and off, I had heard of Bishop Alfieri for some fifteen years, and on one occasion had received from him an invitation to preach in his church, but as most of those who had spoken to me about him belonged to that set of people, mainly women, who take their religion as they take their Russian ballet or their Freud, I had decided to steer clear of what, for all its prominence in certain of London's religious charts, appeared to me a shallow backwater of modern spiritual life. But the Squadron Leader belonged to none of London's 'fashionable' sets and was anything but a crank. He was a professional

R.A.F. officer of the very best type, clear-headed and efficient, and I saw no reason not to accept his invitation to join him and his wife on Sunday when they were to visit Bishop Alheri's church.

The church, or it would perhaps be more correct to call it a religious drawing-room, was situated in a large apartment building. When we arrived in the early afternoon the place was almost full. The congregation consisted of people who looked well-to-do, but there were as many men as women and quite a few of them were in uniform. The hall was larger than I had anticipated, and could probably seat some two hundred visitors. Its stained-glass windows created the requisite ecclesiastical atmosphere, but the panelled walls suggested an opulent lecture-room rather than a church; and the motley collection of furniture and ornaments surrounding the altar betrayed an aesthete of remarkably catholic if somewhat extravagant taste. The precincts of the altar were separated from the main body of the room by a number of steps and further by a miscellaneous collection of religious accoutrements. There were large bronze incense burners from China and India, stiff arm-chairs which might have figured in the portraits of Renaissance cardinals, and a great number of ornaments in metal and wood. For all the symmetry with which this *coquillage* had been put together, the whole arrangement struck a baroque note. Close to the altar and leaning against the right-hand wall stood a throne-like chair sumptuous in dimensions, design, and execution.

The *mise en scène* of the altar itself, a structure in the Louis XV style, had evidently been planned with a subtlety that revealed an astute knowledge of the interplay between the sensory and the more transcendental reactions of the human psyche. The candlesticks upon the altar were of particularly elegant design and the background behind it was composed of a piece of rich damask, all the more beautiful because its apricot colour was faded with age. A door on the left led to what appeared to be the vestry. The organ on the right was almost hidden in darkness. For not only the light from the candles but equally streams of light projected from concealed lamps were focused upon the altar, enveloping it with the silvery iridescence peculiar to certain modern stage settings.

From the organ came the muffled notes of a composition by Palestrina. An acolyte of some fourteen or fifteen years of age was busying himself with the final preparations for the service. The boy's pale and melancholy face had the beauty of a Byzantine ikon and his eyes seemed to belong to some bygone century. The mouth alone was boyish, and I couldn't help wondering what his occupation during the remaining six days of the week might be. Did he attend a school, work as a page boy in a hotel, or pose as a model for advertisements? A dark blue soutane accentuated his slimness, his hair was crowned by a minute skull cap, and his slippers were of black silk. He performed his duties with complete self-confidence and seemed indifferent to the presence of some two hundred people who followed every one of his movements with their eyes. When-

ever he passed in front of the altar, he inclined his head and body in a bow that was half adoration and half graceful curtsy.

After he had disappeared in the vestry, the place remained silent for several minutes. Then, additional lights were switched on above the altar, and from the vestry emerged a small procession. It was headed by a vergier carrying a cross; then came the boy, swinging in steady rhythm an incense burner; and finally, Bishop Alfieri; all three advancing with slow deliberation. The bishop's pallium and stola were ancient and very beautiful; a mitre was on his head and a large bishop's ring on one of his fingers. He wore purple stockings and his shoes were richly embroidered. Upon reaching the altar he fell upon his knees and after a few seconds' silence intoned the Lord's Prayer. He recited it with remarkable clarity but after having reached the words, 'Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven', he broke off with a solemn Amen. He then rose slowly to his feet and walked towards the pulpit on the left, a wooden structure richly carved. For a minute or two he fumbled about arranging the reading-lamp and sorting out the books that were piled up on the lectern. Finally he placed a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on his nose and turned towards the congregation. 'I will first read a few passages from the Upanishads.'

His voice sounded more vigorous and rather more worldly than it had done during the prayer. This impression of vigour increased as he went on; and, perhaps because he read so much more impressively, and with an enunciation infinitely superior to that of most clergymen, his performance reminded me forcibly of the theatre. He had evidently spent much time in preparing the right accents, pauses, and modulations, and he knew how to extract the maximum effect from every sentence.

Possibly I might not have associated his reading with the stage if his face had not suggested that of a character-actor. He was fairly tall, and though past middle age, still vigorous. It may have been the silver of the light and the silver of his silken robes that conveyed a general impression of frailty, but there was nothing frail in his keen eyes nor about the bushy eyebrows. In my incorrigible wickedness, for a moment or two I wondered whether the coal blackness of those eyebrows was the exclusive work of nature. The bishop's nose was sufficiently prominent to save his mouth from appearing as big as it really was. The lips were full and well chiselled and had the expressiveness that so often seems to distinguish those of practised orators. I was by no means surprised that the elocution of a man whose face suggested that of an actor, and in whose eyes apart from some spiritual urge there seemed to be both worldly experience and intellectual keenness, should evoke by turns the impression of a recital, an easy conversation, and an *exercitium spiritualis*.

After he had finished the Upanishadic quotations, he opened the Bible. He read a passage from Saint Paul, but though in his running commentary he stressed the great wisdom of the man of Tarsus, in one instance he added with a mischievous smile, 'Personally I cannot stand that gentleman', a remark that somehow succeeded in sounding neither flip-pant nor incongruous, and with which I might easily have agreed if my

own admiration for 'that gentleman' had been less pronounced. Throughout his reading and the accompanying commentary, the bishop spoke with the natural ease of a man addressing a group of friends who had just 'dropped in' to hear an account of some personal incident.

This conversational manner seemed to be admirably suited to his listeners, for within a few minutes he appeared to be directing their response at his will. After he had done with Saint Paul, he took off his spectacles and in a tone of an even greater intimacy began to address us. 'I have preached this morning,' he said, 'and I do not propose either to repeat my lengthy sermon or to give you a new one.' He then set out to expound his own views on religion. Though his tone struck me at times as theatrical or too deliberately jocular, it was impossible to deny his sincerity or the soundness of his views. He did not hide his impatience with most of the existing churches, yet stressed with fairness what he regarded as of value in each one of them. He pointed to the fundamental tenets of all the great religions and emphasized that their underlying truth was identical. In the end he admitted that in his own church, distinctly Christian though it might be, he tried to bring about a fusion of all that he considered most valuable in the various great creeds of the world.

After he had finished his talk, he retired to his throne-like chair on the right of the altar; and the verger stepped into the pulpit to read the lesson, which was from the New Testament. My eyes turned towards Bishop Alfieri. He suddenly looked tired and strangely aged, suggesting a lay figure clad in magnificent garments and set in a magnificent chair. The mechanical gesture with which he incessantly stroked his upper lip indicated that his recital had left him in a state of nervous tension and exhaustion, and I imagined that the main purpose of the verger's performance in the pulpit was to give him a rest.

The lesson concluded, the bishop rose from his throne and advanced to the altar. He carried in his hands the incense burner and, first facing the altar and then the congregation, swung it to and fro filling the place with gusts of fragrant smoke. After handing the smoking receptacle to the acolyte, he knelt down in front of the altar, but almost before he had taken up the new pose, the boy approached him to spread the folds of his skirt over the soles of his shoes which, in prosaic starkness, were staring at the congregation. This insignificant act of foresight showed how little the bishop left to chance and how conscious he was of even the smallest aesthetic matter. When the boy had concluded the camouflaging of his master's soles, he placed upon the bishop's shoulders an antique tippet, whose silver strands for one short moment caught the rays of the concealed lights, flickering up like glittering insects. He then withdrew silently and inconspicuously yet with such grace that the congregation could not help being aware of his self-effacing service.

Left alone and still kneeling, the bishop raised his hands towards the altar and kept them in that position for several minutes while he recited a prayer that obviously came from none of the established prayer books. It

was a long invocation in which he called upon the divine spirit from which comes 'protection, peace, knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence'.

The last word of the prayer had hardly died away when the sound of the organ burst forth. The bishop still kneeling in front of the altar, was again joined by the youth, and together they took up the tune of the hymn, a beautiful early Italian composition. They sang in Latin, and there was pathos in the blending of the two unequal voices, the one shaken by emotion and age and at times breaking into a falsetto, the other, almost that of a young woman, crystalline clear, impersonal, and to all appearance utterly unmoved.

Even when the chant was over the organ continued to cast its sensuous spell over the congregation, its tune sweet and slightly intoxicating like honey and incense. The bishop rose slowly to his feet, and the faithful acolyte approached him once again, removing the mitre and replacing it by another, and finally covering his shoulders with a long scarf of costly lace the colour of fading primroses. Thus fully clad for the climax of the service, the bishop uncovered the holiest of holies which until then had rested in a silver receptacle. With an expression that was both intense and solemn, he raised the chalice above our heads, and I had the impression that he was so absorbed in the sublime act he was performing that he was no longer fully conscious of our presence. He held the chalice in his raised hands for several seconds, then slowly replaced it in its silver cover, and finally knelt down once again. The whole congregation followed his example and the next ten minutes were devoted to silent prayer.

The colours, the music, the incense, and above all, the bishop's own concentration and effort, had meanwhile wrought among the congregation the magic in which a mystical union with the highest is no longer of necessity beyond the reach of a common mortal. Without that magic no religious service can be more than a formality. If all the bishop's efforts had produced nothing but the concentrated meditation of the worshippers, this in itself would have seemed to justify the service, some of the elaborations of which might have struck one as no more than clever stagecraft. The liturgy had proved its worth. Quite obviously Bishop Alfieri was conscious of the fact that the visible symbols of a liturgy are more than superficial trimmings. If, apart from their magical significance, they helped to create the desired psychological atmosphere and to mobilize the innermost spiritual resources of the congregation, he was not the man to ignore them. Magic, liturgy, and the appeal to the senses combined had transformed the initial reticence of the worshippers into spiritual willingness, and had opened doors that in the normal course are not easy to unlock.

What, however, seemed to me even more apparent than the transformation of the two hundred people, was the effect of the service upon the bishop himself. There could be no doubt that he had been transported to regions where his religious ardour could find its fullest consummation. It was as if he had used both the congregation and his church for a per-

sonal mystical fulfilment which without these might have been impossible to achieve. I even began to wonder whether Bishop Alfieri had not erected his precious shrine in the centre of fashionable London, had not filled it with its motley collection of works of art, had not evolved the composite form of liturgy, nay, of religion itself, for his own sake as much as for that of the men and women who came to his church. Anyhow, these two purposes appeared to be so interdependent as to be almost identical. In consequence it was less of a paradox than might have appeared on the surface, that the bishop's pronounced egotism—how could I doubt that it was pronounced?—needed for its fulfilment a submersion of the ego in a communal effort. To find his self—a purified and more transcendental self—he in the first place had to lose and thus deny his individuality in the corporate act of worship. Only through such a sacrifice of self could he reach the summit of his own spiritual exaltation, and only through that same act could he help his congregation to abandon their individual selves for the sake of the common purpose that had brought them together. As a result, he could transform their latent religious emotions into a living force and his church into something more than a luxurious drawing-room filled with ecclesiastical bric-à-brac.

My attendance at Bishop Alfieri's service was the last incident in a week in which again and again the central fact of the war was pushed into the background by a set of experiences that seemed to belong to a completely different order of realities. From Monday onwards the chief reality was, once again, the war, or rather, the R.A.F.

VIII

After breakfast on Monday, I called on my friend at the Air Ministry who took me to the Posting Department. After chasing from pillar to post, we finally landed in a dark little room where a bespectacled F.L. presided over mountains of files. Since my friend was a Group Captain, the officer was of course most obliging. Yes, he knew all about my posting, and asked why we hadn't been to see him before.

'You're being sent to a Fighter Group,' he said.

'But I am a bomber air-gunner and have been trained exclusively for bombers,' I replied. 'Surely that's a mistake. I'm afraid I know next to nothing about fighters. And I believe I'm too old for Defiants.'

'You're not going on operational duties but as a staff officer to Group H.Q.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'An Air Staff Ops. job at Fighter Group H.Q.' he repeated affably.

For a moment or two the whole room spun around me and I didn't seem to know where I was. Then I pulled myself together. 'You don't mean a ground job in an office, an office job, do you?'

The F.L. smiled. 'If you like to call it that.'

Surely he was joking. Though the room was no longer spinning, per-

spiration had broken out upon my face. 'I'm awfully sorry to give you so much trouble, but I'm certain there's a mistake somewhere,' I tried to control my feelings and remain courteous. 'Listen, I am an air-gunner, a gunnery leader, and I've applied for an air-gunner's job in a Wellington squadron, and I believe the squadron, 941 at Manhill to be exact, have applied for me. But even if that application should have been turned down, ten days ago I was appointed air-gunnery instructor with the Polish Air Force at Nottings, which was suddenly cancelled. Anyhow, all these are air-gunnery jobs; no-one has ever spoken to me about a staff job or has ever trained me for one. The posting you speak of is obviously due to some misunderstanding.'

The bespectacled F.L. must have noticed the state I was in, and only after I had finished did I realize that though I had intended to control myself, I had been more or less shouting all the time. 'I'm awfully sorry,' he said sympathetically, 'but there is no mistake anywhere and the posting is quite clear. You are Air Staff Ops. officer for N Group with later transfer to O Group, to become eventually assistant to the Controller.'

'But N and O Groups look after fighters. I know nothing at all about fighters. Since the first month of the war I've always been connected with bombers, and, please believe me, I do know something about Wellingtons. I don't want to boast but at Sandfield I passed out top.'

'I know all about your record and I'm awfully sorry, old man,' he repeated, 'but really I'm not responsible for your posting and can only tell you what has been decided for you by the higher-ups. Anyhow your new job necessitates the rank of an F.L., so you'll no longer be a P.O. but go up again to F.L.'

'I don't care twopence whether I'm a P.O. or an Air Marshal, but there must be a mistake somewhere. I have been given special permission to go through the air-gunner's course, and after I got my wing was sent deliberately to the S.C. It would be madness to waste all the time and money for my training and push me back into administrative duties now.'

'Well, you have been transferred to Administrative Duties Branch already, and I really can't do anything.'

At last I began to realize that the poor man wasn't responsible. I apologized for having almost lost my temper in his room, thanked him, and departed with my friend.

'But this is awful', I started all over again when we had returned to his office. 'Surely they haven't spent hundreds of pounds on me and made me have more than a hundred flights in order to put me into an office?'

My friend sympathized but of course could do nothing. For a minute or so he remained silent; then he observed, 'I believe I know what's happened, though of course I haven't got it officially or even unofficially. I believe that since Sir Arnold Wilson was killed as an air-gunner they have definitely made up their minds that no-one above a certain age is to be allowed to fly as an operational air-gunner. And without wanting to seem rude, I believe you've reached that age.'

'But then why should they have let me spend all these months doing air-gunnery? I know I am older than any other air-gunner, but, believe me, I know as much about the job as anyone. If I am too old for it or what not, why should they have let me go in for it at all?'

'I am afraid you're being really unfair. Quite frankly I think you've been treated with extraordinary courtesy, not to say favouritism, by the higher-ups. I wonder whether you realize that?'

'What do you mean?'

'Though I don't know the facts, I'm convinced they allowed you to train as an air-gunner as a sort of compliment. They probably thought highly of what you had done for the Poles and by letting you become an air-gunner did their best to repay you and show you their appreciation. They might have put up your name for some medal, but they probably knew that air-gunnery would please you more. I can assure you, not one in ten thousand has succeeded in wangling his way into air-gunnery in the way you have. Your air-gunnery was probably nothing but a handsome compliment for which you really ought to be grateful. No other service would have treated you with equal fairness.'

I appreciated my friend's argument, and indeed no-one could have been more grateful than I had been all the while at Sandfield and Bentley. But this latest decision seemed almost a kind of cheating, and I was still unable to see the situation in the light in which my friend painted it. Compliment or no compliment, it all seemed too incredible to be grasped. 'Even assuming that you're right,' I continued, 'why should they be sending me to a Fighter Group and not to bombers? I worked at Manhill both in Ops. and Intelligence and have some inkling of staff work in a Bomber Group, but I know nothing about fighters.'

'An Air Staff job is something of an honour. Believe me, hundreds of officers would give anything to get a job like that.'

'You know quite well that I haven't joined the R.A.F. to get honours or smart cushy jobs. All I wanted was to do a useful piece of work. If I can't be an air-gunner why not at least let me do something where I can be useful, air-gunnery instructor, bomber intelligence, interrogating officer? I don't want a smart job but one about which I know something.'

'I quite agree, but it's not for me to say why they should have made this strange choice. But don't forget there's a war on and you're not the only officer with whom they have to deal. What probably happened was that knowing you were now free and having made up their minds that a staff appointment would be the right thing for you, the higher-ups told the Posting Department to get you some decent job. And the Posting boys merely looked round the vacant pigeonholes, and obviously the first they came across was Air Staff Ops. in N Group.'

'But then why not in a Bomber Group?'

'I imagine they had an immediate vacancy for an F.L. in fighters but not in bombers, that's all. Anyhow, you know Braynelaw, why not ask for an interview and thrash it all out with him. He is a big enough man not to take the departmental view and to do something unorthodox.'

IX

After leaving the Air Ministry I must have walked for an hour through the streets without realizing what I was doing. This is impossible, this is impossible, I repeated to myself stupidly, hoping all the while that I was merely dreaming and that all that had taken place during the morning wasn't true. What right had they to do this to me? Why should they have done it? The whole universe seemed to be centred in that all-pervading question. No, it couldn't be true, it was just a bad dream. For had I not just passed all the important tests, the technical ones of my profession and the far more difficult ones within myself? Yet when at last I had found the niche in which I should be able to give all the service that I was so eager to give and in which there was perfect contentment as well, just at that moment my prize was snatched away from me. And for what better reason than that of the ignorance or the whim of someone at the Ministry.


I walked and walked and when eventually I looked at my watch, two o'clock had struck and I remembered that I had had a luncheon engagement at one. But it was too late to do anything about it and I didn't feel like stuffing food into myself. The only thing I could do was to try and secure an interview with Braynelaw, whom, however, I wasn't likely to find at his office before three. I had enough time to walk all the way, and as I had landed somewhere beyond Saint Pancras Station, I could reach Whitehall comfortably before three. But while I was walking through the crowded streets, I felt, nay, I knew, that my visit would be of little avail. The morning's news had done more than throw me into a state of gloom; something within me seemed to have snapped. I walked towards Braynelaw's office yet I knew all the while that this was the end, the end of my R.A.F. life. I might remain in the service and, of course, I should remain in it, but no longer was I of the service. Service, service . . . ? The sound of the word suddenly clothed itself with a different meaning. Yes, service. What about it? Had I joined the R.A.F. merely to have a good time? Or rather, to be of service? Variations of this thought began floating through my mind, making me feel uncomfortable. Of course I shall go on and do my best to be of 'service' and do whatever is asked of me. Of course, of course . . . my mind continued to repeat as though this affirmation could give me inner stability. Yet deep down I knew that I was fooling myself. Yes, my mind and body would be of 'service' but not I. The I that only a few hours ago had been so eager to serve, however great the demanded sacrifice, that I seemed dead, or rather, it had already left the R.A.F.

What is reality, I had so frequently asked myself during the past week. I knew the answer now. Reality was when the foundations from under your feet were suddenly torn away; when the dreams for which you had lived for many months were shattered and became an aching memory. Reality was when inside there was nothing but a sense of futility, an unrelieved blank. Reality was when somewhere deep down there was a queer sensation of pain.

X

It was getting on for three when I reached Braynelaw's office. To my surprise his secretary informed me that the Air Vice-Marshal would be able to receive me within ten minutes. While I sat waiting I felt neither impatient nor anxious, my mind was blank. And somewhere deep down, as if a hundred miles away, just that funny little pain. Many years previously on the eve of an attack of appendicitis, and long before I had become actually conscious of any definite pain, I had felt something similar: the minutest little screw turning inside, but so gently that you did not know whether it was really there or merely part of your imaginings.

Braynelaw was affable as ever, and his kindness and realism enabled me to collect myself. He was greatly surprised to hear of my posting and called it 'madness'. He indicated, however, and he did it most tactfully, that probably my age had had something to do with the decision taken by the authorities. If not air-gunnery, he asked me, what else did I feel most suited for. 'Intelligence in a Bomber Group, interrogation of Luftwaffe prisoners or an Intelligence job in the Middle East', I replied without a second's hesitation, adding that for any of those jobs my qualifications were infinitely greater than for the one to which I had been appointed and of which I knew absolutely nothing. If I was not allowed to continue as an air-gunner, I finally added, I might at least use some of my pre-war qualifications, such as my knowledge of languages or of the Middle East and the whole Mediterranean area. Braynelaw asked me to send him a letter with all my suggestions and promised he would do what he could. I thanked him and left his splendiferous room. But this time, contrasting with previous occasions, I felt no sense of confidence, no elation whatsoever. As though I knew that there was nothing he could do. Or anyone else. Was it fate again?



Book Five

THE MAN BEHIND THE SWITCHBOARD

Chapter One

AIR STAFF OPS.

I

I was to report on Tuesday at the H.Q. of N Group at Oldfort up in the North. My little Austin, having served me faithfully for many years, had more or less reached the limits of its endurance, so while in London I had replaced it by a newer car. Whether there was any symbolical meaning—as I vaguely fancied—in my separation from the faithful old car or not, the fact remained that the end of our association coincided with the end of a distinctive period in my life. Though once again I found myself an F.L. and was setting out on a new job, the queer little screw inside was reminding me all the time that my R.A.F. days had come to an end. There was not the slightest rational justification for such a belief, hardly concrete enough to be formulated in words. Moreover, I knew that in war-time you cannot simply leave a service as you might a civilian job in peace-time. Yet in spite of what reason told me, deep down inside I no longer regarded myself as part of the R.A.F.

I left London in my new car early on Tuesday morning and reached Oldfort at tea-time. Group H.Q. were situated on the outskirts of the town in a small camp. There was no living accommodation in the camp and everyone was billeted in the town. My own quarters were at the Red Lion, a murky little hotel behind the railway station, to which I departed after reporting to the adjutant, a kindly, bespectacled F.L. with the countenance of a family solicitor.

‘When do I start work?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, there’s no hurry. You can start whenever you like. To tell you the truth, we’re absolutely flooded with Ops. officers and don’t know what to do with them. But you won’t be here long, only for training, and then you’ll push off to the new O Group, up north. If, however, you feel particularly energetic, you can call on me some time to-morrow morning and I’ll take you to the Ops. room and show you what it’s all about.’

Unfortunately, on the following day the adjutant was absent, having

received twenty-four hours' leave, and the other officers to whom I applied advised me to call again on the following day when the adjutant would no doubt do all that was necessary.

Luckily the parents of a friend of mine lived at Oldfort. I had rung them up soon after I had arrived, and had been invited to dine with them. When they heard where I was billeted they said, 'You can't live in a place like that. Won't your authorities give you permission to be billeted with us?' Indeed, the Red Lion did not quite strike me as an ideal place to live in when one's job apparently left a good deal of free time. I didn't object to the hotel itself, but being a very light sleeper, I found the noise of the establishment disconcerting. The Red Lion was situated at a busy street corner which was one of the chief stopping places for trams and buses, and apparently the rendezvous of the local swells, whose exchange of intimacies under my window had not ended till the early hours of the morning. Luckily no-one at H.Q. seemed to care where I stayed, so from the noisy shabbiness of the Lion I moved to the tranquillity and luxury of my friends' house with its own large garden and excellent library.

II

On the following day the adjutant was at H.Q., and after a preliminary talk, in the course of which he tried to impress upon me the importance of a Fighter Group Ops. room and the honour attached to work in so august a place, he finally took me to the holiest of holies.

From outside, nothing could have looked less impressive than the secret sanctum. All I saw was a tiny brick hut surrounded by disintegrating sand-bags. The hut contained a minute guardroom with armed guards who examined the visitor's credentials rather more thoroughly than had been done at any of my previous stations. Behind the guardroom and after passing through stout iron gates, we found ourselves at the top of a long staircase leading downwards. After walking down for some time, we reached brightly lit corridors with rubber floors that deadened the sound of footsteps. We descended further still, and finally, a door was opened and we entered a brilliantly lit hall, strikingly reminiscent of one of those early German films which were so impressive by virtue of the vastness, complexity, and mechanical ingenuity of their *mise en scène*. High above, at one end of the hall, there were glass cages with officers sitting in them like exhibits in some Wellsian film; on the opposite wall, tiny electric bulbs of different colours were going on and off. Throughout the entire place numerous telephone switches were being operated by airmen and W.A.A.F.s; dozens of them also performed in robot-like uniformity functions the meaning of which eluded me. Altogether, the character of the place struck the uninitiated newcomer as tense, efficient, and slightly artificial. No doubt this impression was heightened by the temperature which was that of a hothouse.

Except for the telephone switchboards, I couldn't detect a single feature that the place had in common with the Ops. room of a Bomber Group.

The centre of the floor space was occupied by an enormous table, known, as I discovered later, as the Table, surrounded by dozens of airmen and W.A.A.F.s and covered with different-coloured discs, little flags, and other gadgets. It was impossible not to be reminded of a roulette table at Monte Carlo. The top of the Table was formed by a huge map made of rubber, and the discs and plaques upon it represented aircraft flying at the particular time over certain parts of the British Isles. The different gadgets were pushed to and fro across the Table by the many plotters sitting around it and armed with long sticks indistinguishable from those of croupiers. All the plotters wore telephone ear- and mouth-pieces round their heads and each one of them looked after a certain area of the territory covered by our Group. His telephone kept him in constant communication with the H.Q. of the Observer Corps of his particular area. The position of any aircraft sighted over the area covered by the particular Observer Corps would immediately be communicated to the plotter who instantly marked the corresponding position on the Table with the appropriate symbol.

The large wall at the back of the room was occupied by a graphic representation of the many fighter squadrons that operated under the control of N Group. By means of blue, green, red, and yellow lights, the state of preparedness and the activities of each squadron, flight, and section were shown at a glance.

As I discovered later, the glass-screened boxes on the opposite wall were not really boxes but proper rooms. In the central and largest of them sat the Controller, the man responsible for the tactics of the entire fighter force commanded by our group. Looking down upon the Table in the centre of the room, known as the Floor, he could instantly see the number, position, height, and speed of every British or enemy aircraft in the air at the particular moment. Next to him sat the Ops. officer, half-hidden by a vast switchboard. The somewhat smaller glass cages on the right and on the left contained various intelligence and liaison officers of the Army and Navy. Below the glass cages and slightly raised from the floor, there was a narrow dais running the full width of the room. Most of its space was occupied by switchboards behind which sat the representatives of the Observer Corps, another Ops. officer, and several airmen and W.A.A.F.s whose job it was to trace on charts the course of enemy aircraft.

At first, the general scene as well as the various activities in Ops. room seemed bewildering; yet I guessed that for all its complexity, the work was far less difficult than it appeared to a novice. Except for the Controller and one or two other officers, everyone was performing functions that were to a great extent purely mechanical and demanded neither individual initiative nor thought. All that seemed required was a grasp of the underlying method, and precision in execution.

After being in Ops. room for about two hours I developed a violent headache. The place was hot and stuffy, and after my outdoor life of the previous few months and, indeed, the open-air habits of many years, the sudden change must have been too drastic not to produce its effects. As

time went on I longed more and more for fresh air, but decided to remain in the place till lunch-time, hoping that by degrees I should get accustomed to the atmosphere.

III

Though I was at liberty to have my meals outside, during the first few days I made a point of lunching in the mess so as to get acquainted with my new colleagues. Most of them were men in their forties and fifties, and after the youthful atmosphere of Sandfield and Bentley, they appeared to me even older than they actually were. They seemed fairly typical of what I had always imagined staff officers to be. Some had rather grand names and a corresponding manner; others merely tried to emulate their more aristocratic colleagues. At lunch in the simple dining-room of an extremely simple mess building there would be one or two Air Vice-Marshals, a couple of Air Commodores, and a number of other fairly senior officers. The most prevalent rank appeared to be that of Wing Commander. The atmosphere of the mess was, of course, quite different from that at Bentley and Sandfield. You heard no swearing, none of the perennial juicy adjectives which seemed to provide the chief linguistic fare of air-gunners and armourers, and the manners in general were those of the more select service clubs in London. It was only when on one or two occasions I dined at the mess and afterwards happened to drift into the anteroom that I discovered that in certain circumstances such as, for example, over their drinks, the language of my new colleagues differed little from that of my earlier ones.

I was longing for the freer and more natural intercourse of my air-gunner friends; I was longing to sit on the floor of the crew room; to get oily, dirty, and tired in the armoury; to talk of how my gun had behaved, and to listen to the accounts of my friends about the ways of their guns, and, altogether, to experience the reality of life at Bentley. I should probably have enjoyed the well-tempered artificiality of Group H.Q. had I found my way to it straight from Sleethole, but after Bentley, I couldn't help feeling prejudiced against my new surroundings. However much I tried not to think of the last few months, I found it difficult to discover anything in common between my exalted colleagues and myself. Long before I had come to Oldfort, I had learned that no human bridge in the R.A.F. is built on safer foundations than that of common service interests. Unlike everyone else in N Group, and in spite of all my efforts, I found it impossible to develop any real interest in my work, and it would have been sheer hypocrisy to pretend that I could ever love it. Thus the main link between my colleagues and myself was missing.

It appeared that I had been posted to Oldfort for training and that eventually I was to work at H.Q. of a new Group to be formed in Scotland. (Once again time and money were being spent on my training, while there were three or four jobs for which I was fully trained and which I could have attended without a further day's loss.)

IV

My proper instruction began on my fourth day. Though on the previous day the Air Marshal who was to be my commanding officer in Scotland had told me in the mess that my job was to be assistant to the Controller, the local authorities put me under training as an Ops. officer. Which of the two was right? Was this yet another case of contradictory orders issued by different departments? Fortunately, it was immaterial to me what duties I might have to perform. So as Ops. officer I began to train, trying each day afresh to forget everything that might have been, and to squeeze out of the job every ounce of interest that it had to offer.

The Ops. officer sat in the Controller's room, that is to say, in the central and largest of the various glass cages at the back of Ops. room. It was his job to collect for the Controller all relevant information, to be his messenger and telephone operator, and to act in general as his factotum. It was he who would get the kicks if the Controller made a mess of things and who naturally could not reply in kind. The place he occupied in the glass box was on the Controller's left behind a long telephone switchboard. By means of this formidable instrument, he collected all the necessary information from the various sectors, Observer centres, fighter squadrons, Fighter Command, Navy and A.A. liaison, and half a dozen other places. At moments of poetic fancy he might regard himself as the centre of a definite universe—by no means one without significance and power—with his finger on each individual pulse which sent the life-stream through it. But though he was a centre, he was a purely passive one, with no will or initiative of his own, rather like a loudspeaker through which the voices of great men may resound. He had to follow each movement on the Table, and be aware of every phase of whatever aerial combat was taking place over the area controlled by N Group; operate his switches, talk to several different places almost simultaneously, and keep a log book. Yet for all the intricacies and responsibilities of his job and for all the exaltation of his title, Air Staff Operations Officer, he was really little more than a telephone operator with the work of three telephone operators in one.

Once you had got used to the complicated picture in front of you, had learned the meaning of the various symbols employed, and the correct procedure, the job was far easier than it appeared at first. It was certainly infinitely less difficult than mastering the mechanism of the Browning gun or Hispano cannon, the hydraulic system, the gun turret or air-gunnery tactics. Yet it did not take me long to realize that I should never make a success of it. Mine was not the type of meticulous mind that could shut off all individual thought in order to perform purely mechanical actions with efficiency. As far as I could judge, my job at N Group would have been ideal for a certain type of female mentality that revels in meticulousness and precision for their own sake. Anyone who in civilian

life had been a telephone operator, stenographer, private secretary, or had had anything to do with certain aspects of broadcasting would have been admirably suited for it. The more independent and individualistic your upbringing and your peace-time occupations had been, the more likely were you to prove yourself inefficient in the Ops. officer's chair. Of the dozen jobs that I might have been given in the R.A.F. I could not think of a single one for which I was less suited. But reminding myself of that uncomfortable moment on my way to see Braynelaw when I had resolved to continue to be of 'service', I was determined to become an efficient telephone operator.

On my first day of training I spent the morning sitting next to the Ops. officer, trying to learn about the various gadgets on the Table below, and especially about the jargon employed in the Ops. room. At first that jargon appeared quite entertaining. Each individual air raid enacted on the Table was provided with its own number or letter. Its position was given by reference to the chessboard-like squares into which the whole Table was divided. Thus the Ops. officer's telephone conversations would sound something like this: 'Hinchfriess, can you tell me what Sugar Don is?' (At first you probably wondered what sort of a don a sugar don was, but you soon discovered that sugar stood for S and don for D and that no relationship between the two was to be assumed except the purely phonetic one.) 'Sugar Don's position is Queeny Zebra, niner wun fife zero, niner wun fife zero. Is it a Hudson? Thank you.' 'Loutham, do you know the height of Uncle Monkey in Johnny Wun? Four thousand? Thank you.' 'No, we don't know yet what Orange Pip is; last plot on him was in Ak Nuts at eleven thirty niner, moving towards Monkey Beer.¹ Shall let you know as soon as they phone through what it is.' 'Observer Corps, do you think X23 is really hostile? Can't your posts identify him? Oh, they have got him now. Not hostile? What are you going to call him? Beer Ak? Thank you. Sergeant,' speaking this time to the sergeant in charge of arrangements on the Floor where the Table was, 'I say, X23 is not hostile. We'll remove the X and call him Beer Ak.' And the sergeant on the Floor removed the miniature flag X23 and replaced it by one with the letters B.A.

Though at first I found the 'lingo' amusing, in time its robot-like uniformity became wearying. It was of course essential to the work but it made the work appear even more mechanical than it really was.

¹ In plain English this sentence would read: 'No, we don't know yet what the aircraft marked on our table as O.P. is. The last time the Observer Corps (or Radio Location) ascertained its position, it was flying on a southerly direction over the square marked on our table as A.N., and the time was eleven-thirty-nine.'

V

DIARY

Once again I am sitting in the Controller's room, behind the Ops. officer's switchboard. After a few days' instruction, the whole procedure seemed quite simple and the authorities decided that I could do the job on my own. In consequence, I have been put on regular duties and am now doing Ops. officer work in routine watches. It is an exceptionally quiet day and though for some twenty minutes two German raiders were shown on the Table, they faded out eventually and the Table is practically empty except for a few of our own fighters and Coastal Command aircraft patrolling the coast. The Controller on my right is engrossed in a thriller—Penguin edition—and the Intelligence officer on the left, whom I can just see through his glass wall, is napping. At the Table below only seven plotters are sitting: one of them is reading a Sunday paper, another is smoking. Five of the plotters are *W.A.A.F.s*. One of them, a pretty fair-haired girl who looks as though in her pre-military days she had been a mannequin or a chorus girl, files her nails, a second gazes drowsily into space, and the other three are busy knitting pullovers; one in khaki, one in *R.A.F.* blue, and the third in light jade green. For the life of me I cannot think of any service in which that colour is *ordre du jour*. The lights are dimmed and the entire atmosphere pervading the room is that of a sleepy Sunday afternoon. A flicker of life appears only when the plotters round the Table receive some new message through their telephone earpieces—which, however, does not happen frequently. The plotter then pulls out a fresh celluloid arrow, red, blue, or yellow, and pushes it with his long croupier's stick across the Table into its right position.

Now that I am working regularly as an Ops. officer I realize more fully the nature and some of the personal implications of my job. The occasional moments of excitement when an aerial combat is in progress and when everyone in Ops. room, myself included, feels keyed up, are for me the worst of all. However much such occasions break the monotony of the work and however hard I try to forget the past, the general stir invariably makes me conscious of the fact that but for some inexplicable mischance, I might be taking part in those combats instead of passively following their progress on the Table. And it is precisely at such moments that the irony of fate tastes particularly bitter, for as if not satisfied with hauling me down from the air to the ground, it has pushed me into a job in which the sky is for ever hidden, fresh air is unknown, and not even the faintest drone of aircraft is to be heard.

My work would possibly strike me as less deadly if it weren't performed in an overheated, stuffy atmosphere more than a hundred feet underground. By the time my watch is over, I always have a splitting headache. In the distant times of peace, even a couple of leisurely days in London used to tire me out far more than the most exhausting working day in the country. I shall of course have to force myself to get used to the atmosphere; after

all, even the *W.A.A.F.s*, though they may look pale, carry on without grumbling.

The *R.A.F.* has taught me several things already: to live in a community and appreciate team spirit; it has taught me patience and how to find contentment without any of the appurtenances of civilized life that seemed indispensable in peace-time; above all, it has taught me in some degree to overcome fear. Evidently the next thing that I have to learn is how to exist as a depersonalized cog in a machine. Shall I ever be able to learn that lesson? I doubt it. I might have doubted it less had my enthusiasm for the *R.A.F.* not been knocked out of me a fortnight ago. Try as hard as I will to rekindle it, I fail in all my efforts. Something inside me is dead, and nothing I do seems able to bring it to life again. I know that the only truth I should be impressing upon myself is, 'all that matters in war-time is the service rendered to the common cause'. But I find it rather difficult to assess my present work in terms of service, and I know that any lad or girl half my age could do my job far more efficiently. Had I come to it straight from civilian life and completely unversed in *R.A.F.* matters, I might have regarded it as less unsuitable, but how can I forget all that I have learned in the course of this year, or regard my present occupation as unrelated to my earlier experiences in the *R.A.F.*? Have I worked and learned and burned with enthusiasm and gone up in planes more than a hundred times and won my wing with its proud letters *A.G.* in order to inquire from Bumbleton whether Charlie Don is still in Queeny Pip? I know that the outcome of a battle may depend upon whether the information I obtain about Charlie Don is correct or not, yes, I know. Nevertheless . . .

Many of the elderly men who are doing Ops. officer work and who have come to it more or less straight from civilian life, no doubt regard their job as highly exciting, but I am not concerned either with the attractions or the possible disadvantages of Ops. room. I didn't join the *R.A.F.* either for the thrills of a Fighter Group H.Q. or even of those of a liaison officer or air-gunner. It wasn't thrills that I was seeking, and if Ops. room were ten times as exciting as it is, I should still feel a complete stranger in it. If a man sets his heart upon becoming a singer and works for that sole aim and dreams of nothing else, you will not make him happy or evoke what is best in him if you suddenly put him into an orchestra to play the saxophone, an instrument which he abhors and for which he has no aptitude. However beautiful the music that the orchestra plays, to him it will mean next to nothing. I know that I ought to make peace with the work to which I have been put and accept whatever reality I am faced by. But I seem unable to do so, as if I had lost the right sense of direction.

VI

In one respect Oldfort confirmed an experience that I had had already at other stations, namely, how much less difficult it was to get on with the 'lower deck' than with the upper one. In the former category I naturally included all members of operational crews, whether at Manhill, Morley,

or elsewhere, for among them rank distinction counted for nothing, and the existing sense of comradeship always overrode social or other distinctions.

During my early days at Oldfort I had to spend several mornings on the Floor to learn certain aspects of the work, and was placed between two corporals operating one of the large switchboards. One of the two men was a former miner from County Durham, the other a middle-aged married man from Newcastle, who in peace-time had been a wireless mechanic. We soon got into conversation, and after a few days in their company I felt that I had made two friends. Every time I met them in the camp they would grin, and often I would stop and have a chat with them. Though, owing to circumstances, I happened to see more of these two men than of any other lower-deck men at Oldfort, there were several among the latter with whom I had had an occasional talk and who struck me as equally easy to get on with. I had had similar pleasant contacts at my previous stations. At Sandfield it had been the armourers and Corporal Miller who seemed to represent the best type at the station; at Sleethole too it was the N.C.O. instructors, armourers, gunners, wireless operators, and other R.A.F. tradesmen, in whose company I felt most completely at ease and was able to forget the depressing local atmosphere. They talked to me about their civilian past, their reactions to the war in general and the service in particular, their evenings spent in town, and even their *affaires du cœur*. Many of them had at one time or other asked my opinion on private or service matters and in several cases I had had to draft particularly difficult letters for them. Two of them had invited me to their weddings and to one of them I had had to promise to be godfather to his next child. No compliment I had ever received in the R.A.F. did I cherish more than the words of an armourer at Bentley who one evening while I was working in the armoury observed casually, 'Only this morning, sir, we were saying that you were almost like one of ourselves'.

I have never subscribed to any Rousseauesque illusions about *le peuple*, knowing of course that among *le peuple* black and white are distributed as evenly and in as many variations as they are in any other social class. The fact nevertheless remains that in all the non-operational stations at which I served, the lower deck was on the whole more selfless and straightforward and certainly far less snobbish than the upper deck; and in consequence, association with *le peuple* appeared the more satisfactory of the two. What T. E. Lawrence, fresh from his experiences in the R.A.F., had written twenty years previously to a high official at the Air Ministry, appeared to be valid still: '... in the R.A.F. I had an uncomfortable feeling that we [the rankers] were better than the officers: and this feeling was strengthened if not founded on the fact that the officers were treated by the men, off parade, as rather humorous things to have to show respect to. The officers played up to this impression by avoiding all contact with us.'¹

¹ *Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, pp. 405-6.

VII

Before the war my Newcastle friend had owned his own little Morris, and even the R.A.F. had not dulled his passion for everything to do with motor cars. One day and after many apologies and some blushing, he asked me 'whether, if it wasn't too much', and I didn't consider that he was being 'too personal', I could give him and his friend a drive in my car. I naturally said yes and promised to take them out on the first evening when the afternoon watches of the three of us happened to end at the same time. Unfortunately, on the evening which we had finally fixed up, he was suddenly given an additional night watch, and I had to set off with the Durham lad alone, promising his friend to take him on the next possible occasion. The fact that our A.O.C., whom I had as yet never set eyes upon, was alleged to hold strong views on the subject of 'officers associating with other ranks', afforded me an added and somewhat malicious pleasure. Quite frankly, I delighted in doing something that the powers that be would apparently have regarded as 'unbecoming a gentleman and a staff officer'.

After we had left the town, we drove along fields, now and again interspersed by large private estates, their Victorian splendour reflected even in the castellated and begabled lodges of their gardeners and chauffeurs; and then would find ourselves unexpectedly near some huge industrial plant. But whatever the scenery, under a radiant sky and with the last fire of the sun covering house roofs and crowns of trees with copper and gold, it all looked beautiful.

I knew my companion rather less well than I did his colleague, and in the Ops. room he had always been more reserved than the much older man from Newcastle. But ten minutes after we had left the town he seemed transformed. He hadn't been in the country for months and regarded our drive as a novel and exciting adventure. His free evenings were spent with his pals who after the monotony and the restrictions of the Ops. room mainly hankered after movies, dances, and similar entertainments. Throughout our drive he kept on pointing out examples of rural life—a tree laden with plums, ducks in the pond, pigs feeding, a blacksmith shoeing a horse—which, had I been alone, I should have taken so much for granted that I would not have noticed them. He never ceased talking but, being of a cheerful disposition and with a remarkably sound sense of values, his conversation remained consistently entertaining. He had joined the service some time before the outbreak of the war, not out of patriotism or enthusiasm, but because he had lost his last job, and being an orphan, after a fortnight on the dole, did not know where to turn. He had started his working life in a coal mine; lost the job at seventeen; and had then operated a crane in a goods yard, worked behind the counter in an ironmonger's shop, and finally been a pedlar in religious tracts. But he always felt that a wage of twenty-eight shillings per week, the highest he

had ever earned, would not take him very far, and cut out all prospects of getting married. Yet he had been going out with the same girl for a number of years and was determined to marry her at the earliest opportunity. The date that he had set himself was the moment when he would be promoted to sergeant which, with any luck, would happen in another eighteen months' time.

I was hardly surprised that my companion held strong views on the subject of social inequality, but he was neither bitter nor fanatical and, so far as he held any political views at all, was not even a socialist. 'After all, we're all English,' he said, 'such differences oughtn't to be.'

'Are you referring to life in civvy street or in the service as well?' I asked deliberately.

'We're all English,' he repeated, 'and we serve in the same R.A.F. and work for the same victory, but . . .' and he hesitated as if wondering whether he might continue.

'But', I prompted him with an encouraging glance.

'But', he went on and suddenly turned a deep red, 'I shouldn't care to be pally with most of these officers here.' He stopped again as if afraid to say more.

'Why not?' I asked, trying to make my question sound casual.

He hesitated again, then apparently giving himself an inner jerk, continued: 'Why not, sir? Because so many of them are, well, sort of balloony. If they spoke to me off duty, I shouldn't know what to say, they'd make me feel real silly. In squadrons it was, of course, quite different. Before I came to Oldfort I was with a squadron; it was wonderful; the officers treated you like one of themselves and you could just be natural with them. I'd have done anything for them.'

'Don't the officers at Oldfort ever talk to you when off duty? Are they so very different?'

'You bet they are, sir. Some of them talk to us when they're in town, but, if you don't mind my saying so, sir, only in pubs. But we aren't so keen on talking to them then. If we aren't good enough for them otherwise, why should we chum up with them when they sort of make an exhibition of themselves, if you know what I mean, sir? I should have thought that it was far less below an officer's dignity to be civil and associate with the men at any time—oh, I don't mean matey and all that, but just as doing the same job and all being the same Englishmen like, than to be tipsy in front of the airmen. I've never run after any of the officers as some of the N.C.O.s do, but if I've got to associate with them off duty, I'd rather do it when they're civilized.'

For a long time I had been convinced in my own mind that though the exigencies of service discipline necessitated definite demarkation lines between the upper and lower decks, there was no reason why the segregation should be quite so hard-and-fast. The British working-man has by nature a pretty good sense of what is fitting and what not in the relationship between the various classes, and is not the type to take advantage of a more intimate intercourse with his superiors to the detriment of his work

or of discipline. Anyhow it is for the officer to determine how far he may overstep the boundary separating him from the airman.

But there was a great difference between such considered and by no means impossible contact and the utter lack of it, which was so keenly felt by my companion and his mates, and which had been expressed many years previously in T. E. Lawrence's sentence, 'The officers played up to this impression by avoiding all contact with us'. Our fellow airmen from the various Dominions showed us that such a contact could exist side by side with discipline, efficiency, and valour. I had little doubt that if the war lasted long enough the service as a whole would be affected by the spirit of comradeship and of greater equality which the young operational airmen—those doing the actual job of defeating the enemy—were introducing into the squadrons, and which the urgency of their task had made inevitable. However necessary rigid rank distinctions might be in the Navy and the Army, they were often irrelevant in the R.A.F., and entirely dissociated from actual conditions of work. The crew of a bomber might consist of a Sergeant, Flight Sergeant, Pilot Officer, Squadron Leader, and Wing Commander, most of them doing jobs of equal importance and responsibility. Their task, the knowledge and professional efficiency which their job demanded, the dangers to which they exposed themselves, were practically identical. In their case, the rank distinctions of an order based upon an entirely different type of warfare had lost most of its meaning. When you have an officer doing nothing but commanding, say, a hundred men who for their part do nothing but follow his command, the two never mixing or working on a basis of equal knowledge, equal responsibilities, equal authority, the gulf that separates them is inevitable. Among the flying men of the R.A.F. this kind of set-up was non-existent, and in consequence, the segregation by rank easily assumed an artificial character. Obviously, therefore, the distinctions between the various members of a team should be based on some less fictitious order, possibly in accordance with the individual trade and the functions to be performed in an aircraft. What, however, seemed to me begging for reform—as it did to my companion from Durham and to T. E. Lawrence who spoke from the experience both of an officer and a ranker—was not so much the hierarchic order in the service—so long as organized society exists there must always be hierarchies—as the spirit of exclusiveness and superiority that seemed to determine the behaviour of so many of the non-flying officers.

VIII

DIARY

Yesterday evening the wireless announced that a military agreement has at last been signed between the Polish Government and our own. In its essential character this appears to be the agreement which was drafted many months ago, the focus of which was provided by the Polish Air Force in Britain. The Polish naval contingent in this country is minute and army units have only been reaching Britain in the last month or two, that is to say,

since the collapse of France. So I know the vicissitudes of that agreement fairly intimately. Though the Polish venture on British soil has of late broadened out enormously, I seem to recognize certain underlying points that formed part of the memoranda destined for the Air Staff that I was in the habit of drafting at Sleethole.

The picture of our allies which both the wireless and our press paint in such glowing colours is, of course, a true one, but it isn't more than an officially inspired picture and therefore a partial one.

This morning's press reports make me once again cast a backward glance and examine my attitude last spring when I decided to leave Sleethole. Had I acted differently, I should be to-day a Squadron Leader, a Polish decoration would adorn my chest—it adorns the chests of most of my Sleethole colleagues who have stayed on with the Poles—and I should probably exercise a certain measure of influence. Instead, I am sitting behind a switchboard, functioning as an automaton. Yet I know that none of those probable honours would have added an iota either to my contentment or my inner peace. Has the plugging of switches succeeded in doing this? Of course it hasn't. But the switchboard and what it stands for in my service career belong neither to the sphere of my own decisions nor my ambitions. The order that governs it, works according to some inexplicable law that is hidden from me. One day I may possibly discover the secret behind it. But that day isn't yet.

The only ambition that I have ever had in the R.A.F. was to become an air-gunner at Manhill. But that phase belongs to the irrevocable past. Looking back at the events of the last few months, I can only say that, in so far as my own decisions and not those of fate are concerned, I have no regrets; and regarding my future at Oldfort, or in Scotland—no ambitions.

IX

Though the fury of the German air raids throughout July and early August was concentrated on the south coast, and practically all the great air battles took place in the south, there would usually be a few stray raiders who ventured further north. Whatever their purpose—raiding our convoys moving slowly along the coast, collecting meteorological information, or doing mere reconnaissance—they provided a welcome break in the monotony of our work and introduced into it a note of adventure. Though we knew how terribly overworked the personnel were in the Fighter Group Ops. rooms in the south—the strain was supposed to be so great that their watches had to be reduced from four hours to one—we envied them the urgency and the excitement of their work. It seemed almost incomprehensible to us how they could cope with several hundred enemy aircraft and a corresponding number of our own, all simultaneously in the air and engaged in battle. Instead of their three or four hundred, we seldom had more than three or four at the same time. Only at night, when the routine work had more or less come to an end, did larger numbers of German raiders attack districts defended by fighters controlled

by us, and for me, even a single enemy raider was enough to transform the drudgery of the work into something approaching adventure.

Out of many similar days in Ops. room I choose as typical one early in August.

I arrived at Ops. room at eight in the morning to take over the duties from my colleague who had been sitting behind the switchboard since 2 a.m. The Table on the Floor was practically empty. Only one or two of our own aircraft were plotted. Not more than a fraction of the usual number of plotters were sitting round the Table. One of the airmen was reading the morning paper, another was writing a letter, and the few W.A.A.F.s were knitting. Most of the lamps were switched off and instead of being glaring and tiring, the light was soft and dim. On the back wall which illustrated the state of our various squadrons, not a single aircraft was shown as in the air, and the little red, blue, green, and yellow lights were indicating 'released' or 'available'. The two operators in the right-hand corner of the Floor who were in direct communication with Radio Location were engrossed in their books. The Intelligence officer in the glass cage on my left was drinking tea, the Controller next to me was deep in *Punch*. This bucolic state lasted for well over an hour.

At a quarter past nine, one of the two operators suddenly lowered his head as if to listen more attentively to what was coming through the ear-pieces of his telephone. He wrote down the message and passed it on to the 'teller' sitting next to him, a W.A.A.F., who in peace-time was supposed to be an aspiring star in one of the provincial repertory theatres. She was a tall slim girl with flaming red hair, a snow-white complexion, wide and slightly startled eyes, and a mouth whose make-up struck me as excessive even in the galaxy of W.A.A.F.s who seemed to have a greater predilection for lipstick than the members of any other of the women's services. The teller read the message, got up, removed from the shelf above her head a little plaque, arrow, and number, walked towards the Table, and placed her coloured trophies on the spot indicated by the message received a few seconds earlier. The number was 38 and the letter which she affixed to it was X. This X indicated that the reported aircraft was of a suspicious character. The spot on the Table on which she had placed the plaque corresponded to an area situated some forty miles east of our coast. A minute or two later the operator passed on to her another message which evidently confirmed that X38 was an enemy aircraft, for the red-haired girl removed from the plaque on the Table the X and left behind merely the black 38 on its white background: the colour scheme reserved exclusively for enemy aircraft. The little arrow that she had placed on the Table close to the plaque was pointing in the direction of our coast.

The moment the girl had finished performing her duties at the Table, the Floor supervisor, a sergeant who with his thin sandy hair, steel-rimmed spectacles, and frumpish mouth looked like a disgruntled school-master, rose from his chair and turned on all the lights. As soon as enemy aircraft appeared on the Table the room had to be brightly lit, and the

twenty glass-encased boxes under the ceiling, fully illuminated, gave the room the brittle, shadowless brightness of a movie studio. Within a few seconds and as if from nowhere a dozen plotters appeared and settled down in the vacant seats round the Table.

'I think we'll wait for the next plot before sending up anything,' the Controller remarked to no-one in particular. He had hardly finished when the red-haired teller walked across the room and placed a second little arrow under the menacing 38. The arrow was still pointing westwards on a straight course. 'Will you please work out the speed of 38 for me?' the Controller asked me. The second arrow was practically a full square ahead of the first, and I saw at a glance that 38 had done five miles in a minute. 'Practically three hundred miles per hour, sir.'

'Give me Dumbleton,' the Controller said to me. I gave him the connection and a sudden buzz reverberated through the entire Ops. room, connecting Dumbleton with all our loudspeakers. The Controller leant forward towards the microphone in front of him, but before he had begun to speak, the airman, seated in the right-hand corner of our little room and known as Ops. A, uttered the words, 'Serial number one, sir'. Ops. A had to keep a written record of every order given by the Controller.

'Dumbleton', the Controller now spoke into the microphone, and his voice could be heard throughout the Ops. room separated from us by the thick glass wall. 'Dumbleton', half a second later Dumbleton replied, audible to everyone.

'Serial number one,' the Controller spoke into the microphone.

'Serial number one', the voice from Dumbleton replied.

'One section,' the Controller continued, 'patrol twenty miles east of Clanton.'

'One section, patrol twenty miles east of Clanton,' echoed the voice from Dumbleton.

'Eighteen thousand feet,' continued the Controller.

'Eighteen thousand feet,' echoed Dumbleton.

'Correct,' the Controller said.

But Dumbleton did not reply immediately. After three or four seconds the voice from Dumbleton came through: 'Red section, Squadron niner oh fife.'

'Red section, squadron niner oh fife,' the Controller repeated.

'Correct,' Dumbleton replied.

The red-haired girl on the Floor got up and placed a triangular little flag with the number 905 on the particular spot indicating the position twenty miles east of Clanton. Had the Controller decided to send up a flight of six aircraft instead of a section of three, the girl would have chosen a little red circle instead of the triangle. Underneath the triangle she placed a red disk with the figure 18 upon it, representing the height of eighteen thousand feet at which the section was to make its patrol. A few seconds later she added yet another arrow, still pointing west under the plaque 38. She also pushed the whole plaque further west so that it now rested on exactly the same spot on which she had placed the latest

arrow. After a further few minutes the distances between the individual arrows placed on the Table every sixty seconds were decreasing, thus indicating that 38 was reducing his speed. At the same time he was altering his course, no longer going due west but north-west. Within the last few minutes he had reached a spot some twenty miles north of the area over which the section of Squadron 905 had been sent out to intercept him.

'Give me Dumbleton,' the Controller beckoned to me.

'Serial number two, sir,' Ops. A prompted the Controller, and at the same time the voice of the R.A.F. Station Dumbleton proclaimed its presence.

'Serial number two', the Controller announced, and Dumbleton repeated his words. 'Section Red, Squadron niner oh fife', the Controller went on and Dumbleton echoed his words, 'if not engaged, investigate raid number 38'.

Dumbleton duly repeated his words, and at the same time the red-haired girl on the Floor removed the little flag with the squadron number 905 from its previous position twenty miles east of Clanton and affixed it to the plaque 38 which was placed further north and slightly inland.

In the central glass cage everyone's eyes, which meant the Controller's, Ops. A's, and mine, were now fixed unwaveringly on the ominous 38. But the plotters round the Table below us were sitting with expressionless faces, hardly any of them watching the plaque. They had seen too many hostile raids on the Table and had witnessed too many occasions on which an enemy aircraft 'faded out' into apparent nothingness, to be stirred by any particular feeling of excitement.

'I wonder whether 38 has picked up the R.T. message that Dumbleton sent to Red Section,' the Controller observed without taking his eyes off the Table. 'That's what happens so often and then Jerry alters his course and can't be intercepted.' He didn't address his words to anyone in particular and was evidently merely voicing his own fears aloud. He was a youngish Wing Commander who had been to Cranwell and never lost an opportunity to make greenhorns such as myself realize that he belonged to the genuine Cranwell vintage. In contact with senior officers he displayed the most perfect manners but I seldom saw him address a friendly word to or indulge in a private conversation with anyone below the rank of a Squadron Leader.

I waited for a while for the teller on the Floor to receive from Fighter Command the new position of 38, but neither the operator nor the red-haired girl stirred, so I switched on to Fighter Command to listen to what was happening. Yet it was nothing but my own impatience that had led me to think that the messages were coming through less speedily. For I had hardly switched on, when a voice several hundred miles away read out monotonously the new plot for 38: 'Raid thirty-eight,' the female voice recited, 'in Charlie Pip, eight, fife, wun, niner; eight, fife, wun, niner; at ten thousand.' Jerry was evidently descending, but he was still proceeding north-west, which indicated that he had not picked up our

R.T. message to the 905 boys and was unsuspectingly pursuing his appointed course.

The Controller turned towards me: 'Ask Dumbleton whether they have a fix on niner oh five.' Obviously the Controller too was getting impatient.

I switched on to Dumbleton. 'Dumbleton? Put me through to your Controller.' The Dumbleton Controller replied within a second. 'This is Ops. N Group speaking,' I continued, 'have you any idea where Section Red is?' I waited for about half a minute and then the Dumbleton Controller's answer came through. 'They seem to be heading straight for 38, sir,' I turned to our Controller, 'and ought to intercept him before long.'

But the red-haired girl continued to place her little arrows in the same direction and the monotonous voice on the line announced, 'Raid 38^{me} Charlie Pip, seven, three, niner, three; seven, three, niner, three; on , in thirteen thousand', indicating that the raider hadn't moved very far. e, at

Just at that moment the teller on the Floor placed an arrow in a new direction. Instead of facing north-west it was pointing south-east. The Hun must have reversed his direction. When a minute later the next position came through, the teller removed the latest disk indicating the enemy's height of thirteen thousand feet and affixed instead one showing only nine thousand. Something was evidently happening to Jerry, for he was not only turning back but even descending rapidly, in all probability, to increase his speed. The three Spitfires must be on his tail. A minute later he was again turning west, but the distance covered by him in that minute corresponded to a speed of over three hundred and sixty miles an hour: he was diving as fast as he could. Indeed, his height was only four thousand feet. There could no longer be any doubt about his being pursued by the Spitfires. By changing his course and increasing his speed he was hoping to elude them, but he had little height left and quite soon the only thing that yet might save him would be cloud cover. Without it, he seemed caught as securely as a mouse in a trap. Even the Controller was getting excited. His eyes were following the minute movements of the plaque on the Table as though the little toy pushed about by a red-haired girl who was aspiring to become a great actress had some magnetic power. In the course of less than five minutes he had lit three fresh cigarettes, squashing each out in the ash-tray after a few puffs and lighting a new one.

And then something strange happened. The monotonous voice ceased to come through and the teller on the Floor stopped placing new arrows under 38.

'What the hell is the matter?' the Controller yelled into the microphone. 'Is the connection gone? Ring up Fighter Command on your line', he shouted at me, 'and find out what's happening.'

Fighter Command replied instantly. The plots of the Hun and the Spitfires had got so involved with one another that it was impossible to pick them up individually; during the last minute or so they had in fact

faded out altogether. This could have one meaning only: they must have come down too low for our instruments to be able to pick them up.

'Do you think they'll get him, sir?' I ventured to ask the Controller.

But the Wing Commander was evidently not in the mood for conversation. 'How the hell am I to know? You'd better keep on asking Fighter Command.'

'Very well, sir.' I had hardly finished the sentence when the teller on the Floor was once again given a message from one of the telephonists. A second later she walked towards the Table and placed a new arrow on it. The position on which she placed it and to which she then pushed the combined plaque with the numbers 38 and 905 was some twenty miles away from the last one and once again near the sea. The disk indicating the height showed the number 4. The aircraft were climbing again and could thus be picked up by our instruments. This was obviously the chance for the Spitfires. So long as the Hun was diving he had been gathering speed and could hope to evade our planes. Now, however, when he had begun to climb the far greater speed of the Spitfires was bound to prove his undoing.

For the first time in many minutes I removed my eyes from the fateful plaque and glanced round the Table. But I could hardly believe my eyes. The faces of the plotters round the Table were as indifferent as though nothing at all were happening. One of the airmen was actually sitting with his eyes closed, one of the W.A.A.F.s was busily knitting a khaki pullover. It was beyond me.

For two minutes nothing occurred, and then a new plot came through. It was hardly five miles away from the last, suggesting a speed of less than a hundred and fifty miles per hour; its direction was straight north and the height was six thousand feet.

One of the many little red lights on my switchboard went on. 'Yes, Dumbleton?' I replied. 'This is Ops. speaking. What did you say? Oh, well done. Do you know anything else? Not yet? They're coming back? A Heinkel 111? Congratulations.'

The Controller had of course heard my words, so there was no need to repeat them. 'I think you can go to breakfast now, sir,' I said instead. 'They've just caught him. He went down in flames; apparently none of his crew escaped.'

The Controller squashed out his cigarette and picked up the receiver of his white telephone. 'Floor supervisor? Will you take 38 off the Table? Yes, off the Table. They've brought him down.'

This time the Controller's voice was not broadcast throughout Ops. room. Nevertheless the supervisor down below had hardly replaced his own receiver when everyone on the Floor knew what had happened. A slight stir went round the Table. The plotter who had been asleep opened his eyes; the W.A.A.F. with the khaki pullover put down her knitting; everyone exchanged faint smiles and there were a few nods of satisfaction. Even the tight lips of the Floor supervisor loosened for a second in the semblance of a grin. But his elation did not last for long. The moment he

realized that it was all over and that the plaque with the number 38 and the number 905 and the long trail of yellow, blue, and red arrows winding behind it along and across the east coast had finally disappeared, he gave himself a jerk, contracted his face in what presumably was meant to be a determined expression but what in reality looked like an attack of dyspepsia, and walked with exaggerated vigour towards the corner of the room to switch off the superfluous lights. In his heelless, rubber-soled gym shoes which, like everyone else on the Floor, he had to wear to reduce the noise to a minimum, he appeared oddly womanish. The moment he had turned off the main lights, he settled in his chromium-plated chair by the wall and pulled out his pipe. Only two or three minutes could have elapsed since the news of the victory had become known on the Floor, yet, except for the W.A.A.F. whose fingers were manipulating the knitting needles more rapidly than ever and the airman who had again closed his eyes, the Table was deserted.

In the right-hand corner the red-haired teller was getting ready to leave the room and be released by another W.A.A.F. She removed the loose black sleeves with which all the workers on the Floor protected the sleeves of their tunics, pulled out a little mirror and for a second or two studied her face in it with great concentration. I expected her to produce her lipstick and comb, but I was wrong. She merely stretched herself a little, then raised her head and threw it back. During that brief bodily reaction after the concentrated work, she suddenly evoked the picture of a great actress on the stage. For a second or so I wondered whether the gestures, inconspicuous in themselves, yet in the rigid monotony of Ops. room uncommon and almost provocative, had been unconscious or deserved to be regarded as a piece of brilliant playacting. A moment later she gave a nod to the two telephonists at whose side she had been working and walked towards the door. Her shoulders were drooping and in her tired, slightly slouching step, so unlike her determined stride throughout the morning, there was something infinitely pathetic. But no playacting.

I had not realized that the Controller had left the room. But Ops. A leaned across from his distant corner and asked me with a kindly grin, 'Would you care to have a cup of coffee, sir?'

X

DIARY

More and more the atmosphere suggests a lull before the storm. For several weeks now we have been half-expecting the German invasion and it is hard to believe that the lull can last much longer. On both sides of the Channel it was assumed that August was the ideal month for invasion, and it is quite incomprehensible to me what the Germans are waiting for. Unlike the much-suffering south, nowhere in the north have there been many bombs, and daily life and the common note of cheerfulness up here have been little affected. This calm in the face of danger is no doubt a wholesome national characteristic. Unfortunately, it denotes also complacency and that

predilection for the avoidance of facing realities that has been so marked a feature of our national life during the last twenty years. It would appear that even the war hasn't the power to eliminate that feature altogether.

Our comparative security in the north may well deceive the general public, but can hardly allay the anxieties of anyone in touch with true events. At the present moment the chief weapon in our defensive armoury is the R.A.F. It has become the symbol both of our strength and of our weakness. Though my own position in the service is a very unimportant one, it nevertheless enables me to follow the war in the air fairly accurately and to view it in its true perspective. Not only do I see the detailed daily reports of all aerial combats with the exact figures of victories and losses, but I am also in constant touch with the Fighter Groups in the south and with Fighter Command. And in the present defensive phase of the war effort, Fighter Command and Fighter Groups have become the focal point of the air war and thus of our entire progress and exertion. No-one with so detailed a knowledge of the situation would claim that our position is very reassuring. The superiority of our fighters is inspiring and the weight of German losses as compared with our own is tremendously encouraging. But how much longer shall we be able to withstand this ferocious onslaught of the Hun? The numerical disparity between him and ourselves is so great that one day it may easily lead to disaster. Sooner or later the time must come when we shall no longer be able to meet the Germans in the present ratio of one to three or four, and when the exceedingly narrow margin of safety may be wiped out altogether. Some of our fighter squadrons up here in the north have had to be sent south, and more are to follow to replace the losses which the southern reserves can no longer make good. Yet what if the Germans suddenly decide to attack us not merely in the south but further north as well? What if we continue to suffer our present losses and to-day's ratio becomes one of one to ten? No-one seems to know much about the Luftwaffe's true strength, and it is impossible to guess for how long the Germans can continue to launch attacks on the present scale and irrespective of mounting losses. Is there any reason to assume that after having been preparing for more than ten years—for only those who choose to remain deaf and blind could imagine that German rearmament only began with Hitler—the Luftwaffe will not be sufficiently strong to force upon us a struggle on a ratio of ten to one?

Judged purely in terms of reason, the situation is certainly not such as to make one feel either secure or complacent. Yet in spite of what the purely mathematical, though admittedly hypothetical, calculus may reveal, I find it impossible to feel more anxious than I did at the beginning of the war, during the rape of Scandinavia or after the fall of France. I have never assessed this war in mere terms of political and military conflict, and consequently feel incapable of contemplating the final outcome solely in accordance with the enemy's military potential or our own. Was not Dunkirk a miracle? Why should not a similar miracle happen now and save our fighter strength from complete annihilation, and thus the country from invasion? On the face of it there is nothing to warrant such an assumption,

but the less visible powers that must needs be participating in the present struggle do not act merely in accordance with what is revealed by reason. In their deliberations, the physical strength of the various belligerents represents only one among a variety of different factors. If they should consider that for some reason, inherent in a wider spiritual plan, we deserve to be saved, they will come to our aid. I have always believed that they will do so and, in the end, defeat Germany's carefully laid plans.

It is, of course, impossible to 'prove' such beliefs and theories. Intellectually, we can deal with the situation only as it appears on the physical plane, and on that plane it certainly does not allow for undue optimism. Our comparative safety up in the north, and the subsequent tendency on the part of most people here to belittle the gravity of the situation, therefore appear disturbing. For not for a second do I imagine that the miracle of deliverance—and it can be nothing but a miracle—can be wrought unless by determination and spiritual willingness everyone enables the hidden powers to come to our aid.

In some strange way, my own situation at Oldfort seems to be rather typical of the prevailing deceptive lull. Never, since I first joined up, have my days been more peaceful and less warlike, and nothing in my daily life, outside the few hours spent in Ops. room, suggests the war or for that matter the R.A.F. I haven't yet begun my period of night watches and, as a rule, return home in time for tea and spend the remainder of the day in peace-time surroundings and away from any service matters. My host and his wife having left a week ago for a holiday, I have their big house all to myself. When I come back from H.Q. I find a silver teapot and plates with scones, sandwiches, and cake waiting for me; and only a few hours later I move into the dining-room and sit down to a beautifully polished mahogany table laid with silver and handsome china and a large vase of freshly picked roses in the centre, and enjoy a meal that is well cooked and as attractively and attentively served as though war restrictions had never been heard of. If after dinner I don't go out for a walk I move on to the big sitting-room with its comfortable chairs and flowers on each table, and read till ten. And when finally I retire for the night, there awaits me a handsome bedroom with soft Chinese carpets on the floor, silk curtains at the windows, and a luxurious bathroom next door. Outside my windows there are big trees, and no noise whatsoever reaches me from the quiet residential street in which my hosts' house is situated. In the large garden at the back of the house the lawns are as green as only English lawns can be, and the borders are gay with the blue of late delphiniums, the white, pink, and red of roses, and the rainbow palette of sweet williams and antirrhinums. Nothing in my surroundings suggests the anxiety of the moment, and with their peace and comfort they are like a last memory of things past, and unreal in the present scheme of things whose sole reality is uncertainty.

My own movements in the R.A.F. are still quite uncertain. No-one at H.Q. knows when the officers designated for the new Group will be moved to Scotland, and there is a distinct air of unreality about our presence at Old-

fort. We work for N Group, yet we are not of N Group, and are regarded as outsiders. I shouldn't mind the uncertainty of my own position or worry about what the gathering war clouds may imply for me if I felt that my present life still derived its chief meaning from my identification with the service. But no matter what my intellect may be telling me, I know that the link has snapped, and nothing in my work at Oldfort has been able to create even the illusion that it has been mended. For the first time since I joined up I feel a complete stranger in the R.A.F., yet at the same time I am longing for nothing so much as to be able to devote myself to it as wholeheartedly as I did during the last few months.

XI

Of all my watches the one I relished least was that at night, especially if it followed soon after a day watch. My very first night watch happened to take place on such an occasion. I had been on duty in the morning from eight-thirty till one, and then again from one-thirty till four-thirty; yet I had to be at the Ops. room at 10 p.m. for a night watch.

I spent the evening quietly at home; had dinner as usual at seven-thirty, and then settled down to read. By nine-thirty, which normally was the time when I began to feel sleepy, I remembered that I had to desert my book and the comfortable chair and drive four miles to H.Q. Being by inclination and habit an early riser and correspondingly fond of an early bed, I resented the enforced bout of activity at an hour when my eyelids were getting heavy and the only alluring feature about life was the prospect of sleep. It was only when I reminded myself that the entire institution of war, of which my night watch represented a minute fraction, was abnormal and a violation of nature, and when I remembered that a year or two previously I myself had hoped that war might come, so that at last we might free the world from the teutonic incubus, that I succeeded at last in restraining the waves of revolt that surged through my resentful breast.

The evening was dark, wet, and unfriendly. Though in the south the whole summer had been dry and sunny, at Oldfort it rained on the slightest provocation. In the fading light and through the slanting curtain of rain our camp looked dead, as it never did in the daytime. But once I had reached the unassuming hut that enclosed the entrance to the sanctum, and had passed the policeman and the R.A.F. sentry, I found myself within a world of unending light and life. Even the double walls and rubber-covered steps of the staircase could not completely absorb the hum that rose from below, from electric instruments, air filters, teleprinters, generators, and a miscellany of pneumatic appliances whose very nature was a sealed book to me. In its spotless efficiency and with the relentless beat of its mechanical pulse, the whole place seemed at once fascinating and hostile.

When a few minutes before ten I finally reached the lowest floor and opened the door to the Ops. room, the glaring, silent, rigid, and smugly

self-satisfied place looked exactly the same as it had done at ten in the morning or, for that matter, at any other time. The laws of time, the laws of life and nature, seemed to have no existence in the chromium-sparkling rubber-smelling room. Night and day, the sky and the stars, human exuberance, none of these had any reality in this mechanical paradise, no doubt first conceived by some German film producer or scientist. Surely only a German mind could have evolved the robot-like efficiency, the a-human precision of an institution in which most of the essential work was performed by electric waves and telephone wires, switches and filters, and a multitude of apparatus and gadgets, and in which man was reduced to being the obedient servant of those electro-mechanical powers. No doubt without that highly successful institution we should never have been able to hold our own against the German homunculus; no doubt the Ops. room was a wonderful achievement and as essential in modern warfare as aeroplanes, tanks, or submarines; but it was not an instrument of war that evoked an affectionate response in me. I loved aeroplanes, I loved machine-guns, either of which was your servant, yet demanding every bit of your thought and attention; but I hated the sparkling, glaring, spotless, rubber-smelling Ops. room which reduced you to a soulless puppet in some Wellsian film.

In the Controller's glass cage, the Ops. officer at the switchboard was a pilot who had been wounded earlier in the year and who, having been forced to exchange a flying career for administrative duties, had recently joined our Group to train with a view to eventually becoming Controller in a Fighter Station. He looked up and gave me a smile, 'I understand, R.L.,' he observed, 'you hate night watches. I should go home if I were you. The weather is lousy and I don't think there'll be much going on on the Table. Anyhow, I live too far to get home now, and I've decided to spend the night here. So I might as well stick to the Controller's room.'

Here once again was the spirit that I had known so well and that invariably seemed to be associated with operational men. For a second I felt a lump in my throat. Quite involuntarily and to the obvious surprise of the Ops. officer, I gripped his hand and pressed it. 'That's awfully decent of you,' I stammered, 'but I shouldn't dream of accepting your offer. Anyhow, I hate driving in the dark.'

After a protracted argument, we finally agreed that I should carry on till two, while he would withdraw into the rest room behind the Controller's cage where two beds were always ready for those who needed sleep.

As it happened, I might as well have gone home at ten, for it was an exceptionally quiet night and, whether due to the foul weather or to some other reason, not a single enemy raider appeared and none of our own aircraft went up. So the Table remained deserted. Only two plotters were sitting round it, reading books and smoking. I too pulled out a book that I had brought along with me and kept myself awake by smoking and

chewing gum. The Controller had gone to the mess soon after I had arrived, but he had left orders that I was to call him back as soon as anything happened on the Table.

The only time the sleepy atmosphere was disturbed was when at twelve a new lot of airmen and W.A.A.F.s took over for the midnight watch. I had seen the same plotters on duty in the afternoon, but when they arrived on the Floor at midnight their faces were paler than they had been earlier in the day and their reddened eyelids and the darker shadows under their eyes spoke of too little sleep.

XII

During my watch of the following day one of our squadrons brought down a Heinkel 111 over the sea. I had to pass on the message to Fighter Command, whose Ops. officer asked me whether the German crew had been saved. 'No, all five were drowned.' 'That's splendid,' said my colleague at the other end.

I had been following the fight between our Spitfires and the Hun for over half an hour and with ever growing impatience, hoping all the while that the brute who on a perfectly clear day and from a low height had dropped his bombs on a little village, at least ten miles from the nearest military or industrial objective, would be caught and destroyed. Yet when the voice at Fighter Command had uttered the word 'Splendid', I felt something of a shock. I knew that if we didn't destroy them they would destroy us. I knew that the last thing with which I had any patience in total warfare was sentimentality. Yet though I wanted the German airmen to be killed and the power of the Luftwaffe smashed, my colleague's undisguised delight at five men being drowned like rats, gave me a moment of uneasiness. In that last fraction of a second and just before everything closed in about them, those five young men who had deliberately bombed innocent civilians in a peaceful village must have ceased to be Germans, Bismarck's, Nietzsche's, and Hitler's brood, the rapacious robots that I knew them to be, and merely been five human beings passing through the door of final mystery.

And yet when later in the day I contemplated the incident dispassionately, I finally realized that there could be no place for my original reaction even in a Christian and philosophical appraisal of the war. In total war it is wrong to wear next to your skin anything but steel. What you have to do, to use John Bunyan's words, is to 'set your faces like a flint'.

XIII

In the same dreary monotony, with hours of stupefying work behind the switchboard, the days at Oldfort trailed on. With each new day I found myself developing an ever increasing distaste for the innocent switchboard and the very labels affixed to it with the names,—'Dumbleton', 'Hinchfries', 'Forthnessie', 'Floor Supervisor', 'Fighter Command',

'Controller', 'Recorder', 'Observer Corps', 'Observer Liaison', 'Naval H.Q.', 'Raid Intelligence', 'Post Office', 'A.A. Officer', 'For buzz switch back',—aroused in me a quite unreasoning antagonism. No doubt there were innumerable jobs in the R.A.F. far less attractive than mine, yet I couldn't think of a single one for which I felt less suited. To be a plain A.C.2 working in an armoury seemed to me infinitely desirable. Evidently there was some lesson for me to be learned from the experience of acting as an automaton, yet I doubted whether it was a lesson worth learning and I began to resent every bit of it. Had my mental, or rather, spiritual state been less unsatisfactory I might have found the means to overcome my aversion to my work and, finally, even to my surroundings. But I seemed to have reached the same condition of spiritual sloth that I had known so well at Sleethole, and it was as if my entire soul were filled with a grey matter of discontent out of which nothing positive could be born.

When after three weeks not a word came from Air Vice-Marshal Braynelaw, I wrote to him again, enclosing with my letter three different applications for transfer: one to be employed as an air-gunner or air-gunnery instructor, one for Intelligence work in the Near East, and a third for the job of interrogation officer for German prisoners. I passed on the copies of my applications to our ever-helpful adjutant who, however, seemed quite shocked by them. 'Good heavens, old chap,' he exclaimed, 'don't you realize that you have one of the safest and cushiest jobs in the entire Air Force? While other fellows have to risk their lives, the war will be over and you'll still be sitting safely in Ops. room.' Unfortunately I feared he might be right.

XIV

As I walked one evening along the rubber-floored corridor leading to Ops. room I involuntarily overheard part of a conversation between two W.A.A.F. plotters who were just ahead of me and who seemed unaware of my presence. 'They don't seem to realize', one of the girls was saying to her friend in a voice full of pent-up emotion, 'that we aren't mere W.A.A.F.s or robots, but young, and want to lead our private lives as well.' It wasn't difficult to guess who 'they' were, but I wondered what the girl had really meant by 'private lives'. I knew her by sight, watching her almost daily at the Table on the Floor. Though there was something cold, almost haughty in the expression of her eyes, she was remarkably pretty, with a short Grecian nose and wavy ash-blonde hair framing the fine oval of her face. Her usually cool, impersonal attitude gave the intensity of her words an added significance and for a day or two I was unable to forget her passionate outburst.

A few days later I fulfilled my promise to take the corporal from Newcastle for a drive, and in the course of a conversation that seemed to touch upon every imaginable subject, I mentioned without giving any indication of the speaker's identity that I had overheard one of the W.A.A.F.s make that particular remark. What did he have to say to that? After some

beating about the bush, the corporal, a happily married man, clear-headed and intelligent, explained that emotional entanglements played a predominant part in the lives of the younger set of plotters, and the W.A.A.F.s in particular, being used to greater freedom at previous stations, resented the strict discipline of Oldfort. 'When young people work together day in day out, often doing nothing for hours on end, you can't expect them not to get ideas into their heads, sir. Some of the girls have never been away from home before, and because they feel sort of lonely and there's a war on, they get themselves mixed up with the lads before they can turn round. Among the boys there are quite a few who'll deliberately set out to turn the head of any pretty girl they meet. They may not be able to see much of each other even in their free time, yet there's plenty of jealousy about, and secret notes being handed backwards and forwards, and all that stuff, sir, you wouldn't half believe. . . .'

I did believe, though; in fact, all I had been surprised about was how little the passions that moved those young men and women ever seemed to reach the surface. But I knew that while the rigid discipline and the glaring lights of Ops. room might reduce all manifestations of what the W.A.A.F. had called 'our private lives' to zero, they could not stifle the desires that must needs disturb every youthful breast. Even the visible manifestations were not eliminated altogether, though it had needed the W.A.A.F.'s remark and the information that I had garnered from the corporal to make me aware of them. Not having previously given much thought to the 'private lives' of the disciplined crowd on the Floor, I had paid little attention to certain inconspicuous signs, but from the moment that I no longer watched the scene in ignorance, what had been meaningless or had seemed accidental assumed its rightful place in the pattern of Ops. room's life. How true that the world is real only in so far as we can perceive it. Schopenhauer called that reality 'will and imagination'. With equal justification we might call it awareness. For only what we are aware of becomes real to us.

What formerly in the life round the Table had seemed no more than the loose strands of mere chance, insignificant and uncorrelated, turned into a design with its distinctive pattern. The dark-haired girl who was doing teller duties and who on her way from the switchboard on the right to the Table and back again each time passed so close to 'Storrington'—a tall, slender airman—that her body brushed against his shoulder, was she doing this by accident? And did 'Storrington' on each such occasion cast down his eyes by accident? Was there no design behind the glance that 'Helmdean', a W.A.A.F. with chestnut hair parted austere in Madonna-like fashion in the middle, directed across the Table towards 'Southfields', a stocky airman with dark eyes and the flattened nose of a boxer? 'We are not only W.A.A.F.s but want to lead our private lives', many different pairs of eyes were saying, even while their owners were sitting in a glass house and prevented from expressing those 'lives' by more than the merest indication of a gesture. And what about an occasional blush, the quiver of a nostril, the sudden pursing of lips? And what about that occa-

sion with the box of chocolates? 'Dumbleton', a podgy girl with pink cheeks, china-blue eyes, and pouting lips suddenly produced an enormous chocolate box and was passing it round the Table. The only person who refused was 'Kirkbarton', an airman with whom she had formerly been most friendly; and at the same moment an almost imperceptible smile appeared on the lips of 'Forthnessie', a somewhat untidy and flamboyant-looking girl whom I always considered a minx. Were all those ripples of emotion and half-suppressed gestures mere offshoots of chance?

Even though I was fairly far away from the Floor and separated from it by a thick glass wall, once my eyes had become 'seeing', I could almost feel the threads of 'private lives' weaving their intricate, subtle, and at times, overlapping pattern all round the Table. Though the plotters' bodies were immobile, desires and visions might yet be contracting alliances with shadows. Their dreaming minds—for in those prolonged spells of inactivity what else could they do but dream?—were they fired by reminiscence as well as by anticipation? Young as they were, and submerged in the warm stillness of the Ops. room, how could they fail to feel the thrill of their blood? Was there any authority to forbid them to spin rays of vision and desire?

I had been wrong to imagine that any room could be impersonal and passionless. Wherever human beings work together, move their bodies and limbs, open and close their eyes, and occasionally follow dreams, not even the strictest service discipline will stop currents released by the blood's secret telepathy. Private lives must ebb and flow. The flickering red, blue, and green bulbs on walls and switchboards, the glaring lights, the chromium platings embodying wonderful scientific secrets, and the entire robot-like efficiency no doubt represented the Ops. room's most significant part. But they were not the whole of it.

When I realized that the plotters round the Table and the operators at the various switchboards were not mere marionettes out of a pre-war Continental film and that even Ops. room had no power to dry up the ever-flowing streams of 'private life', the immaculate and rubber-scented glass cage ceased to be quite so alien to me as before.

XV

One day at lunch the adjutant came up to me to inform me that since there were far too many Ops. officers, six of us were to be given long week-end leave, from Thursday till Monday. I didn't feel that I was in need of leave, but since a gift horse is something you don't argue about, I accepted the offer with good grace and decided to spend my leave in London.

London far more than the North reflected the country's reactions to the achievements of the R.A.F. Whereas the North was separated from the southern scenes of air warfare by several hundred miles and, in consequence, seemed hardly aware of what the R.A.F. was doing, in London people spoke of little else but the daily air battles over the south coast and

the Channel. Every letter I received from London, every London newspaper, confirmed this. The amazing feats of our fighter boys evoked among the Londoners a wave of exaltation that in its intensity at times appeared almost religious. It was as if London dimly felt that the achievements of our fighters were something more even than appeared on the surface. The man in the street and the press alike referred to the R.A.F. with a fervour which seemed as un-English as it was personal. You might have thought that everyone in London had a son or brother among the Fighter boys. As I soon discovered, for a wearer of the grey-blue uniform with wings on the breast, situations often arose that were embarrassing. Wherever I went, I found people glancing at my uniform and my air-gunner's badge with an expression of affection. In the morning I visited my hairdresser, a reticent, silent man who had been attending me for some ten years and who had not uttered a single word of surprise or inquiry when at the beginning of the war I had first appeared in uniform. On the particular occasion he acknowledged my usual tip with a 'Good luck, sir', and after a second's hesitation added, 'And I do mean it, sir'. In several shops in which I made purchases my 'Good-bye' was met with a 'Good luck' and one or two shop assistants insisted on shaking hands with me, something unique in all my previous experience.

However much or however little all this may have really meant, it moved me deeply. At the same time I felt worried. I should have accepted the sympathy of complete strangers gladly and with gratitude had I believed that I had a right to it and that the beloved wing on my tunic really stood for air-gunnery. But being no longer a member of the flying service, it seemed to me that by wearing my uniform I was acting under false pretences, and that there was something dishonest about my walking along the streets of London displaying an air-gunner's wing, and having all this sympathy lavished upon me. Yet could I turn round and say to my wellwishers, 'I don't deserve your kind thoughts, I am no longer an air-gunner, I merely sit behind a switchboard'?

By the end of the day, both London's affection for the R.A.F. and my own reactions to sentiments whose involuntary object I had become, put me into a state of complete inner upheaval. Every emotion within me seemed to have been aroused—my love for the R.A.F., my hatred of my position in the service, my patriotism, and the corresponding sense of frustration—and when at night I returned to my room, I found myself strung up to such a pitch that something happened to me that I had not experienced for many years: I was shaken by sobs and seemed unable to control myself. When I finally regained my calm, I decided that I couldn't continue with this farce much longer. To be an Ops. officer was no doubt a useful contribution to the war effort, but I found it impossible to regard my own presence in that job as such. I had no clear idea as to what to do, but the link had finally snapped. Whatever was to happen later on, I knew that I couldn't face another day in London.

I left next morning and was back at Oldfort in the afternoon.

XVI

It wasn't until my return from London that I met our temporary A.O.C. for the first time. I was doing night watch, and, for once, had been looking forward to the night, for I was to work under the pleasantest of the half-dozen Group Captains and Wing Commanders who were doing Controller duties. The particular Controller was an elderly man with the fine face of an Eastern sage and eyes whose wisdom seemed the harvest of sorrow. He spoke with a quiet voice, was never ruffled, and treated everyone, whether senior officers or A.C.2s, with the same slightly impersonal and engaging courtesy. In some vague way he reminded me of Corporal Miller at Sandfield, for both of them seemed to possess the secret of how to live in an atmosphere of perpetual peace. When I was on duty under him the work appeared to be easy; there would hardly be any 'switchboard errors' or 'incidents on the Floor', and everyone throughout the Ops. room functioned more efficiently and contentedly than they did under any other Controller.

For about an hour after I had taken over, everything was peaceful in the heavens above and in our subterranean mirror thereof. Not a single aircraft was on the Table and all the lights were dimmed.

Suddenly the entire atmosphere of the place seemed charged with tension. The plotters round the Table straightened themselves, changing their languid attitudes for rigid ones; the sergeant who was doing Floor Supervisor cast an anxious glance in the direction of the Controller's room and within a second or two the Controller himself stiffened as though under the impact of an electric shock. Then I just heard him whisper, 'The A.O.C.' At that very moment the chief, whom I had never seen before, entered our little room.

We were temporarily without our own A.O.C., the old one having been given a new appointment, and the relieving officer from the South visiting us only occasionally. Though he did not actually belong to us, he was treated as our A.O.C. and himself, when at Oldfort, assumed that title. Without saying 'Good evening', the A.O.C. sat down close to the glass wall that separated us from the Ops. room below and, as his chair stood half-way between the Controller and myself, he was only about two feet distant from me. He was sitting slightly in front of me so that I could observe him as attentively as I pleased without making myself in any way conspicuous.

The A.O.C. was a big man with a shining bald head, a fresh complexion, and a thick black moustache without a single white hair. The somewhat flabby cheeks and the fat body seemed to contradict his reputation of having once been a first-rate athlete. But without any particular perspicacity you could see at a glance that this was a man full of contradictions. The uncommonly soft and sensuous lips could within a second compose themselves into uncompromising hardness. Similarly the expression of the eyes, of a vividly copper—almost red—brown, changed without any intermediate stage from engaging and warm into frigidly contemptuous. Obviously he was a man pulled hither and thither by con-

flicting forces; a man both strong and weak; likeable if he wanted to be liked, and, if he didn't, objectionable. He must have had many friends and many enemies. He had the appearance of a ruthless disciplinarian and at the same time of being a prey of what powers and what passions!

After having put his arms on the railing running along the whole length of the glass wall and rested his chin upon his hands, the A.O.C. remained in that position for several minutes. Not moving his head and hardly opening his lips he then remarked, 'This is not a football match. Tell the Intelligence people next door and the Army not to chatter. Silence is the first condition for efficiency in the Ops. room.' The voices from the Intelligence room on the left and of the Army liaison officer on the right were only a distant, hardly perceptible murmur, muffled by the intervening thick glass walls. Both the Intelligence and the Army officers were performing their duties and talking on the telephones attached to their switchboards. The Controller got up and passed on the message to both rooms.

For several minutes the A.O.C. remained in the same position, staring all the while at the plotters below. Suddenly his eye must have caught a plotter sitting by the wall and waiting to relieve one of his colleagues at the Table. The airman was reading a book. The A.O.C. switched on the microphone so that his voice would be broadcast throughout the Ops. room. He then pressed the telephone button connecting him with the Floor Supervisor. 'Don't you know', he brought his mouth close to the microphone, and his voice was carried through the whole place, 'that this isn't a reading club? How can you expect efficiency if behaviour like this is tolerated? You are Floor Supervisor to supervise the Floor and watch such things, don't you know that?' 'Very good, sir,' the sergeant's voice replied.

It appeared that the Air Marshal never spent more than twenty or thirty minutes at a time in Ops. room, so I wondered whether he realized what it meant to sit hour after hour in the stifling atmosphere, with nothing to do. If no aircraft were in the air no message would come through and there would be absolutely nothing for the plotters to do but sit. Could human beings sit week after week, day after day, hour upon hour in that relaxing atmosphere without occupying themselves with something to keep them awake? When the moment for action arrived, would any airman or W.A.A.F. be able to perform his or her exacting duties if during the long hours of waiting they did not occupy their minds with something definite? It was easy to be inactive and yet to remain awake if you came for half an hour's visit as a spectator; but the plotters spent eight hours a day in the Ops. room.

Meanwhile the entire atmosphere had become so electric that I felt if anyone had dared to light a cigarette—the Air Marshal was not a smoker—the whole building would explode. Airmen and W.A.A.F.s sat about rigidly, their pleasant kindly faces taut, their lips drawn. I myself, never very much intimidated by authority or rank, hardly dared to breathe and did my best to manipulate my switches without making any noise.

After the A.O.C. had been with us for about a quarter of an hour three enemy raids appeared in quick succession on the Table.

'Find out from Forthnessie what their weather is like', the Air Marshal, who according to the established rules of the game was really not supposed to interfere with the work of the Controller, ordered me.

I called up Forthnessie. 'What about the height of cloudbank?' I asked, in the tension of the moment using the word cloudbank instead of cloud-base.

Even before I had had time to correct myself, I was hit by the A.O.C.'s voice, 'When you mean cloudbase, say cloudbase and not cloudbank. Through errors like this vital time is lost. You shouldn't have inexperienced officers here at night', he turned to the Controller, and then speaking to me again though without moving his head, he continued, 'I suppose you don't know very much about Ops. work and are under training for O Group?'

'I have been doing regular watches for the last three weeks, sir.'

'Not one superfluous word should be spoken on the 'phone; conversation should be as brief and snappy as possible. A dozen people may want your line while you are wasting time on it.'

'Very good, sir.'

As if from nowhere another eight enemy raiders appeared on the Table. Plotters and 'phone operators on the Floor were working as busily as in a beehive; the Controller was passing one new order after another to the various squadrons.

'Give me the Controller at Fighter Command,' the Air Marshal beckoned to me.

'Yes, sir.' Fighter Command replied within two seconds.

'This is the A.O.C., N Group speaking. Who is your Controller to-night? Oh, it's you, Kenneth? Hello, how are you, old man? Anything doing to-night? Yes, we're pretty busy; the Hun is coming over all right. What about a game of golf some time? Oh, the Hun can't keep me from that. Ha ha ha ha,' his laughing voice had become positively captivating. 'Why don't you bring your wife and daughter along? We shall love to have them. That's very good of you, Kenneth. To London? Ah, the same old scoundrel! Ha ha ha ha, I shan't mind. You're busy? So sorry, Kenneth, keeping you. Don't forget to let me know about Saturday. Hope you'll get a few Huns down to-night. Yes, thanks, we'll do our best. Good night, old man.' After he had finished he instantly relapsed into his former position, watching the plotters round the Table.

I was beginning to feel on edge and I could see that the Controller, who was giving orders without a second's break, was feeling likewise. More raids were appearing on the Table, and by eleven there must have been over forty German raiders, making the plotters down below work like the proverbial niggers. Not for a second could I put down my receiver. Fighter Command wanted to know whether we had sent up aircraft to intercept Raid 114; a station in the north informed me about the time when their machines had landed; the Observer Corps liaison officer passed

through the message that bombs had been dropped near Funton; the A.A. liaison officer asked whether his battery in 'Sugar Charlie' might open fire on Raid 79; the Naval liaison officer reported that one of the convoys off Clanton was being attacked and asked whether we could send out aircraft to protect the ships—'Between ourselves,' he added, 'a most important convoy.' I had been working at top speed for half an hour, talking incessantly, scribbling down messages and anxiously watching on my switchboard two or three red lights flicker simultaneously indicating that other callers were waiting to talk to me.

At long last the red bulbs ceased to glow and for a minute or so there was peace. After taking a deep breath, I began to make up my log book that I had neglected throughout the evening.

'Give me Controller, Fighter Command,' the A.O.C. commanded.

'Very well, sir.' But there was no reply from Fighter Command.

'Can't you ring them?'

'Very well, sir.' Finally Fighter Command answered. 'The Controller, please.' The Ops. officer of Fighter Command informed me that the Controller was busy on another line. 'Will you put him through as soon as he has finished? It's important.—He's busy just now, sir,' I explained to the A.O.C.

'Why didn't you tell Fighter Command who wants him? Tell them that the A.O.C., N. Group is waiting to speak to the Controller.'

'Very well, sir.'

Finally the Controller of Fighter Command came through. 'Hope I'm not interrupting you, Kenneth, but on second thoughts, Saturday week would really suit me better than next Saturday. Do you mind? Yes, Saturday week. Yes, we're frightfully busy, don't know where to turn. You're sure you don't mind? Good night, old man.' He then addressed me, without, however, turning his head. 'Ring up transport and tell them the A.O.C. wants his car.'

'Very well, sir.'

He remained with his arms and chin on the railing for another two or three minutes and then got up. Without bidding anyone good night, he left the room, and at the same moment the tension in the whole building vanished. There were just as many raids on the Table, but there was nothing frantic or strained about the movements of the plotters and operators. The plotting of extremely confused air battles seemed once again an ordinary routine occupation.

'Could you possibly let me have one of your cigarettes?' the Controller asked, 'I'm afraid my case is empty.'

'With pleasure, sir', and we both inhaled the smoke with satisfaction.

XVII

My second meeting with the A.O.C. was a couple of days after the first, when, once again, he was paying us one of his visits. I was doing morning watch in the Ops. room and suddenly he came into the Controller's room.

As soon as he noticed that it was I who was sitting behind the Ops. officer's switchboard, he inquired, 'Why are you still here and not in Scotland?'

'I've had no orders, sir, to leave Oldfort, and my name is on the roster for Ops. officer for the whole of this week.'

'Most of the other fellows for O Group have left already. We'll be able to manage without you. You had better go to Scotland to-morrow.'

'Very good, sir.'

Though from the very first day I had been expecting to be sent to Scotland, there had been so many delays, orders, and counter-orders that I had resigned myself to the thought that the transfer might never occur. And though I had been looking forward to Scotland, it didn't much matter to me in what geographical surroundings my artificial R.A.F. existence was to continue. A corpse doesn't mind where it is sent.

●

Chapter Two

THE SNAPPING OF THE LINK

I

Since I was travelling by car I decided to leave Oldfort early in the morning, stopping at Edinburgh for the night and continuing next day towards my final destination. But in spite of my carefully prepared plan I found myself spending the night at Pitlochry and not at Edinburgh: in fact, after having travelled through half of southern Scotland I did not even cast a glance upon that noble city. All this was due to a strange woman, or rather, to my listening to her advice.

There were, of course, no signposts on the roads and when I had done about half of my journey to Edinburgh, I stopped at a particularly bewildering-looking road-crossing and asked a woman whether she could direct me to that city.

'Turn to the right,' she said affably, making a gesture to the left, 'and follow along till you come to Edinburgh. You can't miss it.'

'Do you mean left or right?' I asked, pointing courteously to her outstretched hand.

'Oh, how silly of me,' she gave a giggle, 'of course I meant left.'

'You are sure, madam?'

'Of course; you just keep on till you get to Edinburgh.'

I thanked her and, as if not forewarned by earlier experiences of feminine vagaries in matters of direction (or time) foolishly refrained from verifying her instructions at some masculine source. So I sailed along, all the while making exciting plans for my free day at Edinburgh, a city that I had always longed to visit. First, I would have a bath, then indulge in my last civilized haircut before I lost myself in the wilds of the highlands; then a generous tea with plenty of scones which, I believed, were called muffins at Edinburgh, and muffins which, I was told, were known as pancakes. Then a walk in the town, perhaps with a visit to the War Memorial and through some of the Georgian streets, and all this to be concluded with an opulent dinner and an early bed. Thus fortified in body and mind, I would set out early in the morning for the last stage of my journey.

When after driving for over a hundred miles, my thoughts all the while preoccupied with these forthcoming delights, there was no sign of my goal, I finally stopped and asked two airmen on the road how many more miles it was to Edinburgh.

'Edinburgh . . . ?' they looked at one another. 'Well, sir, it must be eighty or perhaps a hundred.'

'A hundred? You're joking. What's that town ahead of us?'

‘That’s Carlisle.’

Curse Carlisle, curse the silly wench who had directed me due west instead of north, and curse myself a hundred times for blindly accepting the advice of a female. But no amount of cursing could alter the fact that after having driven for almost five hours I was further away from Edinburgh than I had been when I left Oldfort. Having gone so far off my track, I could no longer afford to visit Edinburgh and decided to take the Glasgow route for Stirling. A night at Stirling would anyhow shorten my journey next day, but no Edinburgh would mean no decent haircut, no hot bath, no scones and crumpets, no War Memorial. Instead, I hurried through the valleys, moors, and slums outside Glasgow, and over more moors, with soldiers along the roads, and with guns every few miles and concrete barricades and pill-boxes.

In one exceptionally pretty valley, surrounded by wooded hills, two Tommies were walking ahead of me in leisurely fashion. Something in their bearing made me slow down to have a better look at them: there was something more uncompromising in their expression than in that of the average Tommy. One of the two was peering at the pages of a book and asking questions of the other. ‘Poles’, it suddenly flashed through my mind, ‘and they are learning English.’ I had hardly passed the two men and turned a bend in the road when a large camp opened up before me with hundreds of tents covering the green sloping hills like khaki-coloured mushrooms. At the entrance to the camp the red-white ensign of Poland fluttered in the wind side by side with the Union Jack. Groups of soldiers were lounging about all over the camp. For all their British battle-dress and their Scottish surroundings they were unmistakably Polish, with faces kneaded more tightly than British ones, with greater impatience in their movements than you would find among British troops. I slowed down again, and for quite a while I passed on the road officers, more defiant in their gait and in the set of their lips, more visibly conscious of their rank than their British colleagues. This then was the camp where the remnants of the heroic Polish Army from Narvik, France, and Savoy had found their British home.

Though all I had had for lunch had been a few sandwiches, I only stopped at Stirling long enough to have a quick cup of tea. The noisy bustle of the town attracted me but little and I decided to move on and, if possible, to spend the night in some quieter place. I found such a place when by six o’clock I reached Pitlochry. After a drive of over three hundred miles, I felt tired and justified in denying myself no comfort for the night. On my right, high above luscious grassy slopes and towering trees, rose in baronial splendour ‘Scotland’s foremost hotel’. As a rule, it wasn’t the exchequer alone that restrained me from setting foot in the ‘foremost’ type of hostelry; but the lavish beauty of the surroundings, and the unmistakable indications of real comfort, made me throw to the winds both prejudice and financial considerations, and I drove up the steep avenue that led to the top of the terraced gardens. After weeks spent mostly

underground, the very prospect of luxuriating for a night on top of a mountain with an unobstructed view of the sky, was something of an adventure.

The scene in front of the hotel, though no doubt quite customary here, was a surprise to me. Cars were arriving almost in a stream, to deposit men and women returning for dinner from golf courses, shooting parties, and fishing expeditions. Their gear in slick leather cases and bags was lifted from the cars by two dignified-looking porters and a page, less than five feet tall and dressed in a magnificent kilt. This was Scotland seen almost through the lens of Hollywood. The scene certainly did not suggest that a war was on and that a few hundred miles away, in England's southern skies, the battles in defence of Western civilization were being fought. When an hour later the hotel guests, without exception in evening dress, assembled for dinner, I, in my shabby Number Two uniform, felt an intruder from a world which was as commonplace to me as their elaborate clothes, shooting and cocktail parties must have been to them. Admittedly, most of them were either elderly or very young, and it was good to see that in a world going increasingly mad there was still scope for a life that though not necessarily more civilized than that of those taking part in the general madness, was at any rate more pleasant. I was the only representative of the armed forces, and the inquisitive glances that met me in the dining-room showed plainly enough that the image of war, even symbolized as modestly as it was by my inconspicuous uniform, did not often intrude into that calmer world. But the number of guests who at nine o'clock gathered round the wireless and the tenseness with which the latest reports of the air battles in the south were listened to, showed that the gulf between the two worlds was far less real than first impressions might have induced one to believe.

I left next morning after early breakfast, and throughout my drive revelled in the beauty of the surrounding scenery. Every few minutes fresh reminiscences of holidays abroad would arise, evoking pictures of Switzerland or of a bit of the coastline near Hyères, or that lovely stretch beyond St. Tropez. Behind long stone walls, parks with magnificent pines and shrubs such as never were seen in the south would tempt the traveller to slow down. And then there were little towns, with spotless main streets, shops full of souvenirs and tweeds, slick hotels and passers-by strolling along at a leisurely pace. With their stretch of clear water near by and the mountains behind them, these townlets conjured up pictures of peace-time summers on the Continent, but there was little in the country through which I drove to suggest that its glories merely formed the appropriate background for foreign tourists. The landscape had greater naturalness; the mountains rising from the lochs, the firs, and waterfalls, did not suggest Christmas cards, were less sophisticated. Unlike their Austrian and Bavarian counterparts they seemed to say, 'You must take me as I am; for even for your sake I am not going to furbish myself up like a musical comedy star. I've been like this long before you dis-

covered me and I hope to remain so long after you're dead and gone.' The grey stone cottages, surrounded by a riot of roses and dahlias, phlox and lilies, were not styled, 'Café zur schönen Aussicht' or 'Gasthof zum Weissen Rössl'. They were just highland cottages.

II

The Group H.Q. which I reached before lunch was situated in a building only half-finished, high up on a mountain slope. Except for a stray airman here and there, the place seemed given over entirely to masons, carpenters, and plumbers. Fortunately the A.O.C., a most accessible and sympathetic man, was present and I reported to him immediately.

'You've come already?' he greeted me, 'Who the dickens has sent you here? We're far from ready and aren't likely to start work before the middle of next month. I wish you'd stayed on at Oldfort.' But he wasn't at all angry.

I replied that I had been given orders by the Air Marshal at Oldfort personally.

As if to change the subject the A.O.C. remarked, 'I've received a copy of your application to be Interrogation Officer in our Group instead of Ops., and I've forwarded it to the proper authorities. I'm sure you're the man for the job, and I should very much like you to do it, but of course the final decision doesn't rest with me. I hope we'll have an answer within the next few days. Meanwhile you'll have to do whatever comes along. If you like you can go off for the week-end.'

I thanked him and was particularly pleased by the contrast that he afforded to the great man at Oldfort.

I drove to lunch at the officers' mess. It was situated a 'mere' eighteen miles away from H.Q., in a private house, tucked away among the moors, at the end of a winding and narrow lane and at a great distance from any other house or village. No doubt the house and the wild and beautiful surroundings would have been pleasant enough to be in with a congenial company of people. Whether the six or seven elderly types of retired officers whom I met at lunch would constitute such a company it was too early to tell. They all unequivocally resented the house in which they had to live, for it was many miles away from the nearest pub—seven miles—or cinema—twenty-two miles—and there was no bus to take them to either. The handsome library with several hundred well-assorted books, and the atmosphere of culture that pervaded the entire place, were not considered a satisfactory substitute. The resentment of one or two of them against their surroundings expressed itself in the persistent use of the few more obvious service adjectives which, when bandied about too liberally, become surprisingly boring.

I rang up B. whom I had visited during my leave in July to ask whether I might spend the week-end with him. He was only some forty miles away from our mess and I got to him by tea-time.

III

On Monday I drove from my week-end straight to H.Q. where I arrived before nine o'clock. Except for the carpenters, electricians, and plumbers and a few airmen no-one seemed to be present. I walked through several rooms, most of them unfinished, white dust lying inch-deep on floors and scattered pieces of furniture. The Ops. room itself was hardly begun and it would probably be weeks before it was in working order. A cheering prospect. And there appeared to be a terrible dearth of air-gunners throughout the service! While I was surveying the depressing scene—which, in spite of the obvious differences, was oddly reminiscent of the one that had greeted me upon my arrival at Sleethole—I became more determined than ever not to let myself in for any new compromise. The days when I viewed service existence through the rose-tinted spectacles of novelty and adventure were over. And if it was to mean kicking my heels and doing nothing, the link that had snapped two months previously would have to snap in yet another sense. 'Don't you realize that you have one of the cushiest jobs in the entire R.A.F.?' Once again I seemed to hear the kindly, bald-headed adjutant at Oldfort addressing me. 'The war will be over and you'll still be safely sitting in Ops. room.' These words had haunted me ever since I had first heard them, but I was determined that they should not do so much longer.

After ten, several officers arrived at H.Q., and by eleven someone suggested that I should join two officers who were closeted together in one of the few finished rooms. Both of them, one a Wing Commander, the other a Squadron Leader, were doing administrative duties in H.Q. Though I offered to do any job whatsoever, from typing letters to filing documents, they were unable to find any work for me. Having learned by experience that in H.Q. being 'keen' and pushing oneself forward was the quickest way to disaster, I preferred the method of sitting still, doing nothing and awaiting events. Practically the whole day was devoted to this ennobling pursuit. And it was the same on the next day and on the following one and throughout the week. One day a Wing Commander, who was to be one of our Controllers, stopped me in the passage and said, 'I hear you've been doing Ops. officer at Oldfort, so I suppose you know all about it?' He gave me an inquiring glance but I didn't feel that a reply was called for. 'Will you please make out a draft for Ops. room procedure and, if possible, let me have it, say, in a week's time.' I delivered my finished and retyped draft (with two carbon copies) next morning. Unfortunately the Wing Commander had gone away on leave, so my draft remained on his table unopened for four days accumulating ever thickening layers of dust.

Otherwise I stayed in the room of my two senior colleagues. Occasionally we would be joined by a Squadron Leader who was to be one of my fellow Ops. officers and who as a rule made his appearance every second or

third day. He had only recently returned from India, and the other two officers had spent a good portion of their careers in India or the Near East. So most of the time the little room would reverberate with this sort of conversation: 'Do you remember Sheikh Mustafa Saudi, that big fat fellow with warts and half a dozen diamond rings, who never moved about without a litter of wives?' 'Don't I? One night I got him blind drunk at the . . . ' 'You should have been at Basra when Freddy Huskins was in charge of the troops. What dinners we used to have in the desert. . . . ' And the eyes of the speaker would become nostalgic as if kuskus and a sheep's eye and mint tea represented his culinary paradise. 'You can have your dinners with Huskins any day. Give me old Brigadier Kingsfoot. No-one in the whole of India offered a fellow better whisky. Ah, good old Kingsfoot. . . . I wonder what has happened to the old boy.' They would continue in this vein for most of the day, that is to say, when conversation was not devoted to the far weightier problems of shooting and fishing and to solemn-faced conferences about the rod, the line, and the fly. My colleagues seemed to live either in the distant past that extended as far as India's northernmost frontiers and Iraq's Habbaniya, or in the immediate future which was symbolized by the lochs and streams of our own neighbourhood. Every evening after four the majority of my colleagues would proceed towards the near-by rivers, and in the morning at H.Q., after 'work' had begun, the previous night's catches and the same evening's prospects would be discussed more or less till it was time to separate for lunch. In the course of one week I heard more about salmon and trout than I had in the preceding forty years of my life, and it was surprising that I could still enjoy the flavour of either of these innocent inhabitants of the Scottish streams. Though occasionally an airman would drift into the room and deposit some files on a table, no document seemed important enough to interrupt the flow of fishing reminiscences. No peace-time holiday spent in a fishing hotel anywhere near Beaulieu or Helmsdale could have savoured more of peace, sport, and leisure than my days at H.Q. In the late afternoon, even our two cockney officers could be seen in the near-by town, all new tweeds and fishing tackle, and later in the mess at dinner they would outdo one another with fishing jargon.

IV

As I had anticipated, the arrangements with regard to our mess kept brewing a constant spirit of revolt. The distance of some twenty miles which separated the mess from the town had little appeal to most of the inmates who in the evening, when the fishing was over, had to rely exclusively upon one another's not invariably congenial company. Night after night they had to see the same faces, listen to the same conversations, and, after the first few days, to the identical jokes. Yet they knew that nearer the town there were several equally suitable houses and private estates that might have been taken over for us. About a week after my arrival, some twenty officers were living in the mess, yet apart from

myself only one other man had a car. So unless we gave our colleagues lifts, they were entirely dependent upon the staff car's twice-weekly journeys. On each such occasion only four officers could be accommodated. A great deal of our time was spent in travelling to and from H.Q. Thus in the morning an ancient bus would rattle over the eighteen miles of moor and mountain that separated us from H.Q. and at twelve-thirty the same bus would rattle us back to the mess for lunch. At two, the journey to H.Q. would start once again, and at four-thirty there would be the same drive back to the mess for tea. If you happened to be duty officer or, incredible though it may sound, had to be present at the H.Q. in the evening for other duties, you would trundle back again at six and return to the mess whenever the last bus from H.Q. set out for the moors. Since each journey took about forty minutes, the best part of three hours would be spent going to and fro. And what was to happen in the winter when for days on end the road over the moors was said to be snowed under and when even under favourable conditions the journey would take over an hour? What of the short winter days when an evening in town would become practically out of the question? The more senior officers at H.Q. were billeted in the town's leading hotel.

Thanks to my having a car, I was far more independent than my colleagues and was able to have tea or dinner in town. Thus my latent spirit of criticism was not fed by an equally personal sense of grievance, a grievance which was to express itself in tangible form at a meeting that had been specially called for that purpose.

Everything to do with the running and the administration of both H.Q. and our mess was the concern of our second in command, an Air Commodore, and it was he who during the meeting at H.Q. was in the chair. He was well over six foot in height, lean-faced, with the nose of an eagle, the black, crinkly hair of a West Indian negro, and the pedantic manner of an elderly bachelor. It was he who was supposed to have chosen the particular house for our mess and was thus regarded as responsible for our seclusion among the distant moors.

None of these details was known to me before the meeting, and this circumstance proved rather unfortunate. Not for the first time in my life I was foolish enough to comply with the wishes of my colleagues and make myself their spokesman. For some time they had been prodding me, declaring in jest that their complaints ought to be voiced by the man with 'gift of the gab'. I had categorically refused, not out of indifference, but in view of past experience. I knew only too well that whenever I spoke in self-defence I usually stammered and made so poor a show that everyone took me to be the guilty party, while if it was a case of defending others I was liable to be carried away completely and become more or less oblivious of the surroundings. In our particular case this might mean that I should forget that my pleading was not among equals but before 'authority'. The laws that governed the decisions of service 'authority' were not invariably based on what one regarded as common sense, but rather on

precedent, red tape, or merely the greater power that the office gave those in a position to express a final opinion.

Unfortunately, after the Air Commodore had asked whether there was anything we wished to discuss apart from routine matters, none of my colleagues found the courage to get up, and from every corner of the room I heard my name whispered. I pretended not to hear but finally the chairman remarked, 'I believe your colleagues want you to say something'. There was nothing I could do but get up. As usual and even though I had foreseen this probability, I was carried away, forgetting that I was speaking to the man who was my commanding officer. Whoever had been responsible for our ludicrous mess arrangements, I said, obviously knew nothing at all about human psychology. For how could he expect a contented and satisfactory team at H.Q. if each one of its members bore a perpetual grudge against the authorities who were responsible for those arrangements? In this part of the country winter would be upon us before long, and in the evenings there would be nothing for the officers to do but sit night after night in the mess. Men who spent the entire day working together and feeding together had to get away from one another and find change and distraction outside their daily circle; otherwise they were bound to get on each other's nerves and become thoroughly disgruntled. Everyone would have accepted the arrangements without a murmur if no other solution had been possible. But . . . and I continued in this vein for some five minutes, finally mentioning the daily waste of time and the wastage of petrol that our daily bus journeys necessitated.

After I had finished, the chairman remarked in a very polite but firm tone, somewhat emphasized by his inability to pronounce the letter r, 'I'm wespensible for the awwancements and I do not pwopose to alter them. You ought to be thankful to live in a beautiful house with beautiful suwwoundings and it's absurd that gwown-up men shouldn't be able to entertain themselves.' He didn't say a word about the question of our daily waste of time—not that this particular aspect of the problem mattered much at the moment—or of that of the waste of petrol. His verdict was final, however courteous the tone in which it had been expressed.

V

For a fortnight I spent my time between sitting with a few colleagues and being a gentleman of leisure in some room or other that didn't happen to be in the hands of the electricians or painters. I continued these leisurely habits throughout the afternoons, evenings, and week-ends. The air battles down in the south of England continued with unabated ferocity. Occasionally a German aircraft would be brought down even in Scotland, but since we had no Interrogation Officer, the job of examining the German prisoners had to be done by the Army or Navy, or R.A.F. Interrogation officers who had to travel specially from the south.

At the end of the fortnight I applied for an interview with the A.O.C. I asked whether an answer had arrived in reply to any of my applications.

He didn't give me a direct reply but remarked that interrogation of prisoners would be done by our Intelligence officers (not one of whom had much knowledge of German). Anyhow interrogation work required special training and I had been trained for Ops. officer which was my job in the R.A.F. I replied that I didn't need any special training; on several occasions at other stations the local Intelligence officers had asked me specially to help them when they had to interrogate German prisoners and I had learned something of the job as far back as a year previously at Manhill. Moreover, I spoke German like a native, knew the German mind exceedingly well, and interviewing people had formed part of my professional work for several years. The Air Marshal, who on former occasions had invariably been kind and courteous, made no reply to my pleading and merely said, 'That's all'. So all I could do was to salute and leave the room.

Even before I had done so, my future line of conduct was suddenly revealed as in a flash and with painful clarity. Something within me had known for months, but I had never dared to let that knowledge reach my conscious mind. I had no idea whether it was possible to resign or not, but I did know that there could be no other solution. When I returned to my room in the mess in the evening, I wrote a letter to a friend in the Navy, asking his advice but telling him at the same time that whatever happened, I was determined to find more useful employment outside. It was he who had originally suggested that, when I made an application for transfer, I should ask for the interrogation job. His reply came a few days later. He advised me to be patient and to make yet another application.

VI

Though everyone at H.Q. constantly grumbled about the daily drives from and to the mess, I personally found that drive the most attractive feature of our entire existence. For the first few miles the road wound and climbed through woods and across barren moors. Once the summit of the mountain had been reached, a vista opened out so magnificent that each day anew it filled me with a thrill whose spell persisted until H.Q. was reached.

Deep down below a firth cut a horizontal moat across the entire prospect, separating with its silver waters a large dusky island from the mainland. On the lower slopes of the mountain opposite, fawn-coloured patches of freshly cut cornfields mingled with pastures and the deep velvet of fir woods and then again with the pink and purple of heathered moors and the glowing russets of bare soil. The green of the woods stretching above them was paler, and at times merged almost into blue. Beyond and above the woods that covered the first chain of hills rose high mountains. In place of vegetation they showed only the solemn brown of earth. Yet another chain of mountains behind them rolled uninterrupted across the entire horizon, their higher peaks painted in a hesitant mauve and the most distant crests as pale as fading lavender.

Above this chain of mountain peaks and across the whole width of the sky moved a cavalcade of clouds, steel-grey and dramatic, like those in El Greco's vision of Toledo. Not for two minutes at a time would they remain the same, and often the Spanish drama would give place to a Baroque voluptuousness of shape and tint. But towards evening, nothing but a few white puffs, minute and cherub-like, would sail across the immense aquamarine globe. Or the evening might paint the lower regions of the sky with the cool green of ripening pistachios turning in the higher spheres to the nacreous tints of sea-shells, and meeting, higher still, a cloud or two, left as if by mistake, and still apricot-coloured from the departed sun.

Often in the morning, mist would draw white whiskers across the faces of the mountains, and the whole scene would become a magic orgy in which all distinction between sky and mountain was obliterated. Together they would turn into a gigantic puzzle in which mysterious gods wove their dreams; and no mortal eye could distinguish what was earth and what was sky. On other mornings the entire landscape would be drenched in one single colour: it might be the smoky puce of an old velvet cope; or mountains, woods, and even fields would suddenly turn to violet. But the most beautiful mornings were those when stone, earth, and tree were of a rich cobalt blue made more intense by a bloom like that on ripe plums.

The daily drive to and from H.Q. afforded us lesser joys as well. Invariably on the moors sheep would be grazing, occasionally clattering up the road and bringing the car to a standstill. Their fleeces were practically white, but their faces, ears, and legs were coal black and their elegant little horns of a beautiful ochre. There was something surprisingly modern about their colour scheme, as though it had been conceived by an up-to-date Parisian dressmaker. They had uncommonly intelligent faces and their pranks and jocular habits constantly reminded me of my dogs. This may have been one of the reasons why I found myself growing inordinately fond of them, but even without the intrusion of personal association and sentiment, I should still have admired them when in the afternoon they settled down on the many rocks strewn about the moor. Those rocks were large, grey, and bare, and they looked as timeless as if they had been deposited in some distant past by a falling star. The sheep had a genius for grouping themselves picturesquely upon them, one climbing to the very summit of the rock and settling down there in a becoming pose; a couple, further below, clinging to some minute promontory; and half a dozen of the less energetic ones distributing themselves around the rock's base. They were perfectly self-contained, and our occasional efforts to tempt them to make friends with us left them indifferent. When they felt in the mood to be scratched, they would seek one of the fence posts and rub themselves against it for minutes on end. But their manners were perfect, and if two of them were troubled simultaneously by the same urge, the latecomer would wait patiently by the fence post until his predecessor had finished his own massage. Only then would he

press the irritating portion against the rough wood and rub and rub and rub.

In several places we had to cross little streams, homes of trout, salmon, or pike. Their narrow beds were formed of peat and their waters rolled along eagerly, like beer from a barrel, dark brown with a flocculent foam, yet perfectly translucent.

It seemed almost indecent to be living in such perfect holiday surroundings, and to enjoy a peace hardly ever broken by the sound of an enemy raider or a bomb.

VII

Fishing expeditions, mess troubles, everything, in fact, was pushed completely into the background when the day of the great ball arrived. It was the first local ball since the beginning of the war and it was held in aid of Scottish war charities. For a fortnight before everyone seemed to be talking of the great event and even at our H.Q. most of the officers had taken tickets. Never had our batmen been so busy pressing tunics and polishing buttons as they were on the day of the ball. When B. informed me that his friends the F.s had asked me to join their party, I decided to go. My hosts suggested that I might bring one of my colleagues along, so I asked Squadron Leader McKie, the nicest member of our mess, a cheerful fellow who only a few months previously had exchanged his flying duties for those of a much despised staff job.

We left the mess in McKie's car and arrived at the hotel punctually at 8 p.m. which was the hour appointed for dinner. But our hosts hadn't turned up yet. They lived some fifteen miles away from town and were to come by car. 'I bet you', I said to my friend, 'Lady F. will arrive here at nine, dressed in tweeds, and by the time she'll have changed and be ready to dine, it will be ten.' The F.s had taken a room at the hotel for the night and judging by what B. had told me of the routine in their house, where every meal was about three-quarters of an hour late, I felt safe in making the forecast. But I had hardly done so when a car drew up and our hosts arrived. Lady F., an American, was not wearing tweeds but an ermine cloak lined with gold, and diamond stars in her beautiful platinum blond hair. Her husband, grey-haired, kindly, and laden with parcels, followed her.

'What's your boy friend's name?' our hostess greeted me, before I had had time to make the introduction, and when I said 'McKie', she answered rather impatiently, 'No, I mean his real name'. In Lady F.'s vocabulary the word 'real' stood for Christian name, but I didn't know McKie's first name and had to ask him. 'Edgar', he said and for the first time in the course of our acquaintance I saw him blush. 'That's swell, Eddy,' Lady F. exclaimed, 'now, boys, let's all go upstairs and warm ourselves.'

So we followed them to their room which, however, proved to be icy. 'Macbeth, darling,' Lady F. addressed her husband, 'do hurry up', and before I had had time to guess what Macbeth was to hurry with, the

obedient husband produced the answer. He was unwrapping the parcels which consisted of bottles of whisky and champagne.

'I guess there are no glasses here,' Lady F. remarked, sweeping into the bathroom in her ermine cloak, 'let's use the tumblers instead.'

The 'heating apparatus' was produced within a few minutes. It consisted of a mixture of one-third of whisky and two-thirds of champagne. 'This is Orchy's invention', the husband explained in an admiring tone, referring to his wife whose name was Orchid, and doing his best with his teeth to pull the cork out of a particularly obstinate bottle.

'Go right ahead, Eddy,' Lady F. adjured McKie, offering him a bathroom tumbler filled with the warming elixir. 'There are two tumblers only,' she added, 'so I guess they'll have to be love cups.' The two tumblers made the round and within a couple of minutes were filled again.

Strange, it occurred to me, how certain American women have the gift for transforming any surroundings into the likeness of a Hollywood film. For though no detail in the room itself suggested anything but Scotland, the general character of the scene taking place within it might have come straight from an American film: people in evening dress, who had met only a few minutes before, were sitting about on beds and addressing each other by their Christian names; a bathroom was seen through the open door, and a woman in a virginal Madonna white dress under her white and gold ermine cloak and adorned with expensive diamonds was dominating a situation the most prominent feature of which was bottles of champagne and whisky.

By eight-thirty three of the bottles had been emptied and the party considered themselves sufficiently warmed up to go down to dinner. We were to dine with the hostess of the ball whose party numbered some twenty people. When our little crowd, consisting of our two hosts, B., McKie, and myself reached the dining-room, all the other guests were already seated and waiting with unmistakable impatience.

'Phyllis, darling,' Lady F. exclaimed to our dinner hostess, 'you must all be famished! Why didn't you start without us?' and on her face there was the self-confident though impersonal smile of a woman well aware that her beauty, her jewels, and her dress eclipsed those of everyone else in the room. She took her seat between the Colonel of a Highland regiment and the Admiral in command of one of the Scottish naval bases, and within a minute succeeded in engaging both her neighbours in what soon became the liveliest and loudest conversation at our table.

I liked my hostess almost as much as I love America, but I gave a sigh of relief when dinner was over and we went into the ballroom where for the first time during the evening Scotland asserted herself.

The large hall was packed. Though the women wore ball dresses and jewels it was the men who conferred splendour and colour upon the scene. Many of them were in uniform, but the brightest colours were contributed

by the men in kilts, both civilians and soldiers. Most of the highland clans were represented and their scions honoured the occasion by wearing not merely their ancient kilt but all that went with it, lace jabots and plaides held together by magnificent brooches, and coats of black and green or red velvet and the sporran and pins with cairngorms shining like honey in the sun, and the skene dhu in their stockings. Most of the stockings were in tartan colours, but others, and they looked the smartest, were of one colour alone, canary yellow, jade green, scarlet, or crushed raspberries and cream.

Notwithstanding the dresses, so long as modern dances were in progress, the scene, though full of colour, was not exceptional. It changed, however, as if by magic, the moment the Cameron pipers appeared and the reels began. Hardly anyone in the ballroom who wasn't a Scot remained on the floor, but for those who did, the occasion suddenly seemed to be imbued with an entirely new significance. Men whose fourscore years were reflected in their bent bodies and snow-white hair, frail-looking ladies with wrinkled face, stepped forward with the same glow in their eyes and the same concentration as that of boys of sixteen. Though to the uninitiated onlooker a lot of what he witnessed might have appeared as mere shouting and jumping and wheeling around, the solemnity of the dancers' faces and their utter abandon soon revealed to him that there was more to it than mere ballroom dancing; it was almost as though a sacred rite were being performed. Subconscious, ancient voices seemed to be calling, transforming the swirling crowd into a race of warriors. For the reel now became a dance of war, of defiance, challenge, spiritual dedication and physical abandon. Bare-kneed, the skene dhu in stocking and jewelled dirk chained to the waist, it was the men whose dance it was. Though the women wore tartan ribbons in their bodices or pinned to their shoulders, they seemed subservient to their menfolk, a mere background for them. The flush on every face, the punctilious adherence of each dancer to the reel's rule, the bond that seemed to hold them all together in some secret unity, all these suggested that an ideal, deep-rooted and significant, was inspiring them. All differences between officers and rankers were completely obliterated, as if the call of their common blood were so much more powerful than the man-made barriers that the service had erected between them. In certain figures of the reel they held each other's hands or danced the figure together without any reserve or sign of self-consciousness.

Even someone as little initiated as myself could feel that it was the deeper meaning inherent in the reels, a meaning that the blood alone could comprehend and respond to, rather than the generalized pleasure of a social occasion that made the dancers fling themselves with abandon into their exertions. Though most of their faces were serious, solemn even, they were evidently enjoying every moment; but the essence of their enjoyment was derived from a dimension other than that in which the ordinary pleasure of dancing was experienced.

Beyond its element of ritual, the outstanding impression created by the

reels was that of a tremendous, glowing vitality. Hardly ever, on an occasion like this, had I seen such a predominantly masculine manifestation of strength. However competent the women might be, they had become something secondary. They might carry the warrior's shield and sword, but they were not the warrior who wielded these arms. Strangely enough, the kilt, the lace, the coloured stockings, and jewels that the men wore did not weaken the essentially masculine character of their dance but rather enhanced it, as if by contrast, or by the fact that the picturesque attire revealed the individuality and prowess of the male far more than his ordinary drab attire could ever do.

Lady F., who since she had assumed the role of chatelaine in a Scottish castle had become exceedingly 'Scottish', insisted upon taking part in the reels with her husband. When the last reel was over she returned to our table at which B. and I had been sitting. Her husband went back to dance and she said to B., 'Do you mind, darling, if I have a *tête-à-tête* with R.? I've got something to say to him alone, and three of us would be a crowd. There are lots of beautiful girls simply waiting to be charmed by you.'

After B. had gone she said, lowering her husky voice, as though confiding a most precious secret, 'I'm so glad you've come to Scotland. I've always longed to talk to you. I'm interested in just the same things as you are. All this means nothing to me, nothing,' and she waved a contemptuous hand in the direction of the dancing couples. 'I've only been interested in Truth, Truth with a capital T, ever since I was a little girl. Spiritual things are my passion, almost my vice, I've gotten a real passion for them. But where I disagree with you, if you don't mind my frankness—but I always believe in being frank with people I'm fond of, don't you?—is that you've cut yourself off from life.'

Surprised, I attempted to protest, but before I could put in a word, she continued, 'You haven't danced in years, you keep on the water wagon—all that is life, and I guess the real thing is to be spiritual and yet enjoy all the good things.' As if to emphasize her words she emptied her glass of champagne at one big gulp. 'They mean nothing to me, nothing,' she continued. 'I shouldn't mind if I never saw another glass of champagne as long as I live, but I kinda want to contact life from every angle, and anyhow those good things make you feel swell. And anything that makes you feel swell must be kinda spiritual. The real thing I guess is to discover the spiritual through the sensual, don't you agree? Though you won't believe me, I swear that I once lived in the country for six months without seeing a soul, just my old negro mammie, and I was never happier in all my life; all the simple true things, cows, milk, and flowers, and trees, how I adore trees, I simply dote on them, they make you feel, how shall I put it, oh I know, *virginal*, yes that's what they make you feel, positively *virginal*', and she lifted her eyes ecstatically towards the chandelier as though it were the crown of some ancient Scottish oak or, perhaps, just of a palm at Miami.

'Oh, Duncan dear,' she suddenly exclaimed, as in their downward

movement from the tree-top her eyes lit upon a laughing young Seaforth lieutenant who was approaching our table. 'How terribly naughty of me, I almost forgot this was our tango, but we've been having such a divine conversation, the Air Force and I, and we've got exactly the same ideas on everything, haven't we, and he's been telling me such thrilling things about Truth. I felt as if I was a little girl again back at Minnesota, but of course, you great big lump of a warrior, you aren't interested in such things, you wicked man. So long,' she rose from her chair, 'I haven't enjoyed anything quite so much in years. But I guess a spot of dance will do me no harm, even though I'm sure you disapprove, don't you?' She was gone and a minute later I saw her tall, Diana-like in her virginal dress, the huge diamonds sparkling in her platinum blond hair, gliding to and fro in the arms of her wicked lieutenant.

I remained at the table and watched the crowd shuffling and jumping and wheeling around. The picture of ever-changing movement and colour was exciting, yet in its unreality strangely soothing. It made me forget my own problems, the unfinished H.Q. on the mountain top, the curse of inactivity. Presently B. joined me.

'Isn't it strange, us two sitting like this at a ball in the Highlands,' he remarked as though speaking to himself, yet from out of that sphere of unreality which had seemed to envelop me all through the evening. 'Though we've both worn our uniforms for a year now, I still often feel it isn't true, you in the R.A.F. and me in the Navy. Do you remember the summer before the war when we discussed what we'd do if war came? We never got any further than that you would be doing some Intelligence work and I driving an ambulance. It seems unreal, us two confirmed civilians, in these uniforms.'

We remained at the table for another ten minutes and then B. was whisked away by one of his women friends.

To get some fresh air I left the ballroom and walked into the lounge leading to the street. I had barely taken a step or two when I found myself buttonholed by the major of a southern regiment, who was very much the worse for drink. He was swaying to and fro and from his glistening eyes tears were falling. 'If you goddam ruddy beggars of the Air Force don't bomb that bastard Hitler, we the Army, we will. And when, ough, pardon me, I say, ough, we will, I mean it, and we will. That's the spirit of the Army, sir, a goddam unbeaten army, if it weren't for the bastard politicians. One to the Army, sir, ough.' He was fumbling about with his whisky glass in an uncertain hand, but finally managed to raise it to his lips. Part of the liquid ran over his chin and collar, then down his tunic. 'Come on, Air Force, have a drink. If you beggars, if you don't bomb Hitler.' His words became an inarticulate gibber and he began to sway so violently that I had to use all my strength to support him. After a few seconds he seemed to awaken from his daze and an apologetic smile appeared upon his face. 'Never mind, Air Force, I'm a bit off my guard

to-night, ough, but never mind, dam' good party, sir, dam' good, and what tarts!' He lowered his voice to a whisper. 'Have you got a tart here? I say, have you got a tart here?'

'I am here with a big party of friends,' I replied apologetically.

'Dam' the party, sir, I'm sorry for you. If you want a tart I can get you one. I can. Dammit if a major in the . . . Regiment can't get a good man a tart . . . I'll get you a tart, you wait and I'll get you one, a beauty, a real beauty, sir.' He raised his glass to his lips and began to shout, 'One to the tarts, there's nothing like tarts . . . and the Army. One to the Army. If that bastard old Hitler . . .'

From the ballroom an Army officer was hurriedly approaching. He got hold of the major's shoulders and shaking him anything but gently, whispered in his ear, 'For God's sake, behave yourself, you old drunkard, and shut up. I apologize,' he addressed me, 'I'm afraid my friend has had one too many.'

Meanwhile I had succeeded in extricating myself from the major's grip and walked back to the ballroom.

Our table was deserted but a minute or two after I had sat down I could hear Lady F.'s voice.

'I guess you two boys haven't met', she said, holding the hand of a tall young Flying Officer of strikingly handsome appearance. He was over six foot in height and his carriage was so straight and proud that he looked even taller than he really was. His narrow head was crowned with a rich mop of chestnut-coloured hair, his eyebrows were two perfect dark bows, and in his eyes there was an expression which indicated that he had seen far more of life than was legitimately due to his immature years. He seemed only in the early twenties yet he carried his head with the matchless self-assurance of someone conscious of great achievement. Or was he in love, it flashed through my mind, and involuntarily I cast a glance in the direction of our hostess. But on her face there was the same slightly impersonal, half-flippant, and half-bored expression that I had seen on it throughout the evening. The young officer supported himself by leaning on a stick, yet I could detect no sign of a limp—nothing but the faintest impression of enforced stiffness in his carriage.

'This is Angus and this is Rom', Lady F. threw our names across the table and drew herself closer against her companion. This implied suggestion of intimacy evoked in me a feeling of anger. Because my reaction was quite illogical and unsupported by reason that feeling was particularly strong.

Though I disliked the fashion of calling newly met people by their Christian names, I found to my surprise that on this occasion I did not object to having been introduced in this casual manner. The mutual ignorance of our surnames somehow fitted into the atmosphere of unreality through which I had seemed to be drifting all the evening. 'I wonder whether he's in love with her', the thought passed through my mind. But instantly I tried to banish it as somehow offensive to both of

them. Yet the thought continued to irritate me and my irritation influenced my attitude towards the young man. It even made me resent his carrying a stick.

Lady F. and Angus sat down, and she poured out some champagne. She had hardly emptied her glass when McKie whom I hadn't seen since dinner came up to her and asked her for a dance.

'You wicked man,' she raised a threatening finger, 'fickle as all you blue boys are. Here I am, spending the whole evening waiting for the best-looking guy in the place to ask me for a dance, and Prince Charming never turns up. So long, boys,' she turned to Angus and myself, and was off.

'I am glad to have met you,' my companion began as soon as we were left alone. 'I know about you and I've been waiting to meet you ever since you got to Scotland. I hate places like this and dances and it's nice to have a chat.'

I looked at him in amazement, and felt an almost uncontrollable anger rise within me. Is this Adonis, this dressed-up boy of twenty, going to tell me that all he is interested in is Truth with a capital T, and that ever since he was a little kid back in the wilds of Middlesex he has only lived for cows and flowers, and that champagne, and even the R.A.F. and Lady F. mean nothing to him, nothing? Yes, and of course, trees, without which there could be neither Truth nor Happiness.

Yet there was something about the young man that made me suppress the rising wave of anger and instead of being rude and getting up as I had intended to do, I remained to hear his version of 'Truth'.

Slowly I found myself removed from the atmosphere of the ballroom, and listening attentively. My companion was neither shy nor overbearing—as I had suspected him of being—and talked as naturally as though we had known each other for a long time. For several years before the war, in fact since he was sixteen, he had worked on a farm in Cumberland; he had a passionate love for the land and was full of ideas how to improve farming and, moreover, how to incorporate nature more into the life of the community in general, a subject in which I had always been greatly interested. After Munich he had felt that the only thing for young Englishmen to do was to prepare themselves for the inevitable struggle and he had joined the Auxiliary Air Force. Next to the land, the R.A.F. was his main passion in life, and his indifference to such pleasures as dance and drink was far from being a pose.

The only thing I didn't seem able to fit into the general picture that my companion had evoked in me, and which continued to irritate me, was the pose of the walking stick.

After we had been talking for about half an hour, Angus raised himself from his chair. 'I wonder,' he said, and his voice sounded apologetic, 'whether I might ask you a favour. Do you mind coming to the men's cloakroom with me?'

This seemed an uncommon request, but without saying a word I got up

and we moved through the crowd and finally landed in the men's cloak-room.

'I do apologize,' my companion said, 'but there is no-one here whom I can ask to help me and for the last hour or so I've felt in need of help. I hope you don't mind. I was injured a few months ago, and this evening I've been walking rather more than is good for me. I believe my plaster wants adjusting and I can't do it myself!' He took off his tunic, collar, and tie, and slowly and laboriously pulled his shirt over his head. From his neck down to his navel his entire torso was encased in what looked like white armour. 'Do you mind just lifting the corners at the back a bit?'

I hardly dared to look and a shiver ran down my back. Never in the whole of my life had I felt such a cad and I would have done anything he had asked me. Though he knew nothing of my thoughts earlier in the evening, they now seemed to be filling every corner of the room and I felt that he merely needed to raise his eyes to see them written on the walls.

'How did it happen?' I asked, without looking at him.

'We were coming back in a Wellington from Germany. I was in 941 Squadron at Manhill, and there was thick fog. I couldn't see the aerodrome and I'm afraid I crashed on landing. None of the other five fellows was injured. They had thrown themselves flat on the floor. But I was sitting at the controls and must have got the full weight of the crash. We bounced three times rather violently and each time I felt that something fresh was breaking in me. It was pretty beastly.'

'You broke your ribs?'

'No, my spine.'

For a minute or so I was unable to say a word, and busied myself with the plaster armour. 'Will it take long?' I asked eventually.

'If I'm lucky eighteen months or two years. Anyhow so the doctors say. But I'm afraid . . .' He didn't finish the sentence. And I asked no further questions.

After I had adjusted the plaster cast I pulled his shirt over his head for him, buttoned his collar and tied his tie, and after I had finished I could not refrain from pressing his hand in a furtive gesture. But I didn't dare to say a word or meet his eyes.

It was three in the morning when I finally found McKie, in high good spirits, and in his car we drove back over the moors to the mess.

VIII

DIARY, Sunday

My first Sunday at H.Q. During my previous week-ends I have stayed away from H.Q., visiting either B. or new acquaintances in the neighbourhood, but a colleague of mine who was detailed as duty officer for to-day was anxious to join a particularly tempting fishing expedition and has asked me to do the 'duty' job for him. So I am spending the Sunday at H.Q., doing, as usual, nothing.

I could put up with this incessant inactivity and might possibly fall less a victim to its demoralizing effects if the contrast between our own idleness up here and the urgency implied by the alarming news from the south were not so depressing, even terrifying. Tremendous events are in progress above England's southern shores, yet, except for what we gather from the daily Air Ministry reports about the aerial combats, there is nothing to make us aware of the true course of events. Yet even without possessing any psychic gifts one easily gathers that the critical hour is approaching. Or has it come already?

LATER

A few hours ago, at six-fifteen to be precise, the duty sergeant from the signals room handed me an urgent cipher that had just arrived. It was quite short and I decoded it within a few minutes. When I had finished the job and re-read the message, for a second or two everything seemed to swim before my eyes. For weeks past, this very message had been the subject of many speculations on the part of every duty or signals officer. We had all agreed that once this message arrived, German invasion was imminent. The most secret safe at H.Q., to which the duty officer alone had the key, contained a sealed envelope the contents of which were unknown to anyone, even the A.O.C., and which was to be opened by him personally after a certain signal had arrived. The cipher that I had decoded contained the instructions for this.

Being a Sunday, no officer senior to myself was present at H.Q. So I unlocked the safe, removed from it the insignificant yet strangely ominous-looking envelope and made sure that it really bore the symbols corresponding to those contained in the decoded cipher. After I had reassured myself, I rang up the A.O.C.'s hotel in town. 'The Air Marshal has given instructions not to be disturbed,' I was informed. 'It is most urgent and I must speak to him instantly,' I insisted, and the tone of my voice must have sounded convincing, for a few seconds later I heard the Air Marshal's slightly impatient voice. 'What is it?' Since the telephone line connecting H.Q. with the hotel was not a secret one, I didn't dare to give him full details. 'A most important signal has come through,' I therefore said, 'which, I'm afraid, sir, calls for your immediate presence at H.Q.' 'I'll be there within a few minutes,' he replied, and exactly twelve minutes later his big car drove up at H.Q. Even before he had had time to take off his hat and greatcoat I went into his room and handed him the sealed envelope. Did I imagine that his expression was more tense than usual?

Within half an hour two of the other senior officers appeared at H.Q., the guards round our building were doubled and all the men were issued with rifles. No officer was to walk about inside or outside H.Q. without his revolver. Oh God, I mumbled to myself, stupidly and selfishly, let something really happen at last.

By nine o'clock the senior officers departed again, and I am now the only officer left at H.Q. Though only one or two new signals have come through I haven't undressed and haven't gone to bed. It is past midnight and I can

hear the guards walking up and down outside the building and exchanging an occasional joke. The thought lurking uppermost in their minds seems to be 'a nice cup of strong tea'. Otherwise no sound rises from near or from afar. No guns, no sirens, no church bells, nothing. This place seems even more dead than usual. The contents of this evening's cipher might be referring to events on the moon. I know I ought to say a prayer of thanks for this.

IX

Nothing did occur, and though on the following morning the wireless announced gigantic air battles throughout the preceding Sunday and vicious attacks of our bombers on French and Belgian invasion ports, our own life continued as though nothing were happening over the blue expanse of Kent and Sussex.

After four weeks there was still nothing to do at H.Q. which remained in the hands of the workmen. There always seemed something queer about leaving the mess at eight-twenty in the morning, arriving at H.Q. at nine and then facing a vacuum. The only officers who had any work were the purely administrative ones. All those who were designated for Ops. room duties were unemployed, and whenever any of us pestered one of the future Controllers to give us some work, the inevitable reply would be, 'I'm sorry, but I haven't got anything for you'.

The balance sheet of my jobs since my arrival was as follows: the drafting of regulations for Ops. room procedure that the Wing Commander had asked me for during my early days and that had necessitated one day's work; detailed arrangements made with Sir Duncan M., Bart., for a fishing party to which he had invited some of our senior officers; 'phoning the adjutant at L. to say that none of our officers would be able to accept their C.O.'s kind invitation to the coming-out dance of his daughter; redrawing a chart of the defence zones round the naval dockyards at F., a job that took me a full afternoon; and bringing three bottles of whisky from the mess for one of our Controllers.

Probably the senior officers suffered from the enforced idleness as much as I did. But at least they could pay visits to the squadrons under our command. Moreover, they loved being staff officers. Not one among them was an air-gunner.

Though I knew that the final separation was approaching, I tried to deceive myself by inventing ever fresh devices that would prove my foreknowledge wrong. If I could only secure the job of assistant to the Controller for which, according to the A.O.C.'s original statement during our meeting at Oldfort, I had been earmarked, I might be able to escape from the switchboard and obtain some more interesting work. I went to see an elderly Wing Commander in whose room I had spent my first week at H.Q. and who was a sensible man with many years' service experience.

I explained the whole position to him and asked for his advice. 'You've obviously been selected as assistant to the Controllor, and, if I were you, I should see the Air Commodore and tell him about it. He probably knows nothing of the facts, and will say yes, once you explain everything to him.'

After having made such an exhibition of myself before the Air Commodore at our mess meeting, I didn't feel very hopeful, but nevertheless accepted the Wing Commander's advice and asked for an interview. I repeated what the A.O.C. had originally told me and asked whether there was a chance of my being employed in the promised position.

'While you're here, you're to do as you're told', the Air Commodore replied, fixing his glance all the while upon a large signet ring which, in Continental fashion, he was wearing on his fourth finger. 'I don't care what anyone at the Air Ministry says. I'm the man to judge whether you're suitable for the post of assistant to the Controllor or not. If you are, I'll send you up to Squadron Leader as quickly as I may send you back to a Pilot Officer's pay if you prove unsatisfactory. It is not for the officers themselves to judge what they're best suited for.'

I hadn't the courage to tell him that even he could in no way affect my position by sending me down to a Pilot Officer's pay, for though I had never been ordered to remove my Flight Lieutenant's rings and though ever since I had first arrived at Oldfort I had been doing a Flight Lieutenant's job and in all official communications my rank appeared as that of a Flight Lieutenant, since the day I had left Sleethole to become an air-gunner I had received the pay of a Pilot Officer.

On the two solitary occasions on which I had come into touch with the Air Commodore, I had adopted a line which to a disciplinarian like himself must have been something in the nature of a red rag to a bull. Had our roles been reversed, I should have probably felt exactly as he did.

In the evening, Wing Commander Wilding, a pre-war officer, came up to me after dinner. He was among the most cultured members of our mess but he seemed very reserved and would spend the evenings sitting alone in some remote corner, reading a book. Though we had sometimes exchanged impersonal remarks, we had never had a real talk together. 'I can't understand, R.L.,' he addressed me, 'why you're wasting your time and knowledge at a place like this. You are obviously not the man for your present job, and I've often wondered what has brought you here. Surely you could be more useful in some other branch of the R.A.F.'

Was it some form of telepathy, I wondered, that had suddenly prompted Wilding to approach me? His words made me smile. 'You have longer experience of the service than I, sir, and you have certainly heard of square pegs occasionally getting into round holes.'

'Why don't you make a row? It's an insult to employ you as a telephone operator. And what else is an Ops. officer? Any W.A.A.F. who has been a telephone girl can do his job far more efficiently. Most of you people are far too timid. Don't you know you never get anywhere in the service

unless you kick? Why don't you apply for some Intelligence job or something of the kind?'

'Don't imagine, sir, I haven't tried. . . . But I've had no luck.'

'If I were you I'd threaten them with resignation.'

'I don't believe I'm very good at that sort of thing, sir. If I ever start talking about resignation, I shall mean resignation. But I know I should never get anywhere by threats.'

'As I told you just now, you're too timid. You don't seem to know how things are done in the service. If you played up to someone high up in H.Q. you would soon be given the right job. Don't imagine that staff jobs are distributed solely according to merit; you aren't in a squadron now. Squadrons are different, of course.'

'Yours seems a very cynical sort of philosophy, sir. I must confess I had assessed you rather differently and I am surprised.'

'Cynicism has nothing to do with it. I speak from experience. I've been in the service for years and I got my present job not because I happen to be suited for it, but because I kicked and threatened to resign.'

'I'm afraid I couldn't kick and threaten even if I wanted to, I'm simply not made that way. The only job that I've really lived for in the R.A.F., air-gunnery, they won't let me do because I'm too old or something, and other jobs that I happen to know inside out I'm not allowed to do, because red tape demands that I should first be trained in them. What can I do?'

'Don't you know anyone high up in the Navy or the Army? Why don't you try to switch over? Don't feel sentimental about leaving the R.A.F. Though up here no-one seems to realize it and fishing is the only thing that matters, we're fighting a war for our very existence. This means that the only thing that counts is to do the job one is most suited for and not sit on one's behind wasting time. Nothing else matters. But believe me, unless you help yourself no-one else will.'

'I didn't know one could resign.'

'Of course one can. You are a V.R. and above conscription age. You can't be forced to stay on in the service. And if you succeed in misbehaving yourself thoroughly and provoking a row with your almighty in Group, he'll be only too delighted to support your resignation. The almighties don't like having anyone on their staff whom they know to be discontented.'

I had another talk with Wilding a few days later, and he repeated that the only way to get a transfer and obtain useful employment was by threatening to resign. However right he might be, I knew that this was alien to my nature. If ever in the past I had acted contrary to it, I had invariably failed. It was all very well in life to kick and fight against unfavourable circumstances, but having made several applications, none of which had got me anywhere, I had evidently reached the moment when I was fighting against what appeared to be fate. And to do so was, as I knew, like running one's head against a brick wall.

On that morning when I had wandered through the streets of London,

something within me more infallible than reason had told me that my days in the R.A.F. were coming to an end. Was it, perhaps, foresight and thus a message from those hidden worlds in which our fate is decided long before we know about it? Whatever it may have been, it was a final verdict. I tried to appeal against that verdict by devising means that would enable me to maintain my link with the service and be of use to it, but that inner something knew all the while that I was fooling myself. The wing on my tunic—the proudest possession I had ever had—had been meant to carry me to a glorious victory, a victory over all that was small and grey and selfish in me. Instead it had never been allowed to spread out. No, there was no victory for my wing.

I might have thrown up the sponge on that dreadful day in London. I fooled myself instead into thinking that I had remained a 'faithful servant'. For a servant I wanted to be, but not a uniformed drone. For three months I had been receiving pay, however meagre, and in return I had been doing next to nothing. Yet I believed that I could earn my money twice over. And yet . . . and yet, occasionally the uncomfortable question would creep up: was I entirely free from blame? Had I really done everything to deserve a less unfavourable turn of events? But I brushed such questions aside and refused to face them. No, I could do nothing. Nothing. Even Wilding's sound and well-meant advice would get me nowhere. There was one solution only.

X

The only regular job that O Group provided was that of being duty officer, which, however, happened only once within a fortnight. There were so many of us at H.Q. that we simply tumbled over each other, since we were all only too eager to secure the rare bit of duty that came our way.

The duty officer's job consisted in little more than spending the night in H.Q., decoding the incoming ciphers and assisting at the pay parade during the day. Since on the first occasion when I was duty officer an officer who had just joined us had taken my place to learn something about the job, I had been deprived of even that modest occupation.

My chance to witness pay parade did not come until the day after my second talk with Wilding. In spite of the fact that I hadn't yet sent in my resignation, I was feeling even more of a mere spectator in H.Q. than ever. Our station being scattered all over the country, the chief part of pay parade consisted of driving with the accountant officer over the moors to the various quarters in which our troops were billeted. Instead of the single parade which was customary at most stations, we had our first one at H.Q., then drove for about half an hour to a rather charming Georgian residence where one part of our troops was housed, and then a further five or six miles to a baronial villa with gables, turrets, a sham moat and all, where another batch of our men was billeted. We ended up before lunch at our own mess where batmen and cook had to be paid.

We remained in the mess for lunch, and continued our job in the after-

noon, first driving across precipitous moors to the house in which the W.A.A.F.s were stationed, and finally finishing up at the opposite end of the town where the couple of aircraft belonging to our H.Q. were kept.

Pay parade was supposed to be a fairly smart affair, with the two officers sitting behind a table spread with banknotes and bags of silver, and the troops lined in front, coming forward singly, saluting, stating their name and number, and then receiving their weekly pay.

What surprised me in the course of the day were the unexpected differences in the bearing of the men at the various places we visited. Contrary to my anticipation, the least unmilitary were the W.A.A.F.s. When we entered the large and impressive-looking entrance hall of the large and impressive-looking house in which they were quartered, they were already waiting, lined up in alphabetic order under the command of their sergeant. They stood smartly to attention and when they came up to the table, they saluted with a dash worthy of guardsmen. Though several of them were obviously newcomers, and not altogether at home in uniform, the majority went out of their way to impress upon the accountant officer and myself that there was no womanly nonsense about them and that they were as good as men. Few of them had been longer in the service than a couple of months, and the bloom of their eagerness to 'play up' had not yet been blown off by routine. Unfortunately, a malicious fate had placed on the wall next to the paying table a huge mirror in an elaborate gilt frame. As she left the table hardly one of the sturdy Amazons felt strong enough to resist the temptation to cast a glance into it. For that brief instant her entire W.A.A.F.dom seemed to vanish, the former mannish gestures giving place to a self-absorbed glance, a rapid movement of a hand to smooth the hair protruding from under the cap, or a touch to the lips, invariably covered with a thick layer of lipstick. In that brief moment Mars was completely forgotten and Venus reigned supreme. The soldierly wearers of the Air Force blue uniform were once again pre-eminently shopgirls or typists, mannequins, housemaids, or ladies of leisure, all equally confronted by a . . . mirror.

In the attitude of most of the airmen who were doing mere administrative or fatigue duties there seemed something forced and listless. Many of them looked surly and they reminded me of some of my colleagues at Sleethole. Though they saluted smartly enough, they did it without enthusiasm, stiffly, and like automata. I wondered why so many of them should present so disappointing a picture and why even among them a spirit should prevail, as it evidently did, that I had imagined to be the sole prerogative of administrative and staff officers.

Much sooner than I had anticipated I was provided with an answer to my question. I discovered it during our visit to the aerodrome. Only about a score of airmen were employed by our H.Q. on the aerodrome which was the property and responsibility of a Coastal Command squadron. Outwardly those airmen looked far more scrubby than did their colleagues at

the various billets that we had visited already. Their trousers and tunics were soiled with oil; some of them appeared in overalls that were so greasy as to be almost black. Since most of them wore no hats they could not salute—the airman's easiest way of demonstrating his smartness; and they entered the little hut in which they received their pay with a nonchalance that might easily have been taken for lack of discipline. But their easy-going manners were most natural, and there was something good-humoured about them. Altogether, their demeanour was that of a contented crowd. Instead of standing rigidly to attention with sullen faces, they would lean against a chair and acknowledge their pay with an easy smile and a wholehearted Thank you. As soon as they left the hut they would begin to crack jokes and their laughter re-echoed in the improvised pay-room. Evidently they were happy in their work and in each other's company. They lived beyond the atmosphere of that conventional gentility that surrounded their colleagues at H.Q. and that is liable to descend upon most British communities in which different social classes are herded together in a pursuit 'higher' than that of mere manual labour. Even outside the service it has often occurred to me that it is this self-conscious gentility which so often saps the naturalness and vitality of our social life.

Most of the airmen employed at H.Q. were really nothing but clerks, and so were their superiors, whether officers or N.C.O.s. If the particular work they had to do was of no great urgency or importance and did not call forth their individual sense of responsibility—which it very seldom did—it failed to satisfy them, and left much of their spiritual and physical resources unused. Men and officers alike would then begin to think of themselves and of their true and imaginary grievances. Their desire for promotion, their preoccupation with non-essentials, such as their insistence upon the personal 'dignity' of their position, departmental rights and red tape in general, all these would become of increasing importance to them, making them more and more conscious of the social and rank distinctions that separated them not only from their superiors but even from their own colleagues.

The men at the aerodrome were obviously interested in nothing but their job. Each one of them worked according to his true capacities. He either knew something about engines or wireless or guns, or he would have to make way for someone else. He could not hide his incompetence behind a title, and he could not very well aspire to a rank higher than that which corresponded to his professional activities. The airmen at the aerodrome seemed fully to realize that one loose screw, one gadget not properly tested, might cause the death of many. In consequence, the screw was more important in their daily lives than were the miscellaneous problems and preoccupations which had produced that churlish expression upon the faces of so many of the men whom we had visited earlier in the day.

XI

Life has a strange knack of working hand in hand with our own motives and desires, even though such collaboration does not always take the form which we ourselves should have chosen for it. I had decided to take in my resignation to the A.O.C., but in a last foolish effort I had also prepared yet another exhaustive application for transfer to a different job. If the A.O.C. proved to be sympathetic about the one, the other would never emerge from my pocket. Fate should decide. Anyhow, what did it matter? Hadn't fate decided already, months ago?

The moment for my latest *démarche* was not a very propitious one. Only a few days before, I had again succeeded in making a nuisance of myself. As one of the prospective Ops. officers I had been asked to express an opinion on the new arrangements made for the Ops. officer's table in the Controller's room. Since the Ops. officer had perpetually to keep his eyes on the Table on the Floor below, it was essential that his switchboard should be facing the Table. If it was placed at an angle to the latter, he would constantly have to turn his head and finally become something of a contortionist. At Oldfort and at all the other Ops. rooms that I had visited, his switchboard was placed parallel with the Table on the Floor, so that he could follow each movement on it, whilst at the same time attending to his telephones. For some reason or other, the Ops. officer's table and switchboard in our as yet half-finished Ops. room were at right angles to the Table. I naturally didn't hesitate to express my opinion, and couldn't refrain from adding that it was folly to expect any Ops. officer to perform his duties satisfactorily if he had to work under such conditions. After a few hours' work he would be a mental and physical wreck. My Ops. colleagues all expressed their own views in terms that were far less restrained, but once again I was the only one who spoke openly; and the reply that I provoked was that the restricted space necessitated the unorthodox arrangement; that the point I had made was childish and merely demonstrated that I had an incorrigibly critical nature and always imagined that I knew everything better than anyone else. 'You always express truths', Wilding remarked to me in the mess after he had heard of my latest act of *lèse-majesté*, 'which the uppers hate hearing because they know that there's no answer to them.' And just before my decisive interview, one of my colleagues warned me that 'something' was brewing against me: he had heard some gossip at H.Q. Since, however, my mind was made up, it didn't really matter very much what sort of reception I got.

The events that followed were seen through a glass darkly. However vividly my mind may have retained the memory of some of them, at the time they were no more than a dream, disturbing, painful, yet never clear or powerful enough to symbolize reality. It was mere chance that it happened to be a Flight Lieutenant bearing my name who was the marionette moving to and fro, speaking and doing things. The innermost I, the I of awareness, took no part in these somnambulist peregrinations.

There was the morning—am I sure it was a morning?—in the *sanctum sanctorum* at H.Q. A large sheet of yellow blotting-paper with not a single spot on it is lying on the writing table. Exactly in the centre. I always knew the almighty was a very fastidious, even pedantic man. Two pens, two pencils, one of them blue and exceedingly fat. Not a single file; no books, not even King's Regulations. Not a map. Across the floor, telephone cables, loose, like earthworms, mud-coloured. A big hole in the floor whence the worms emerge, fully exposed and not clothed in grey, but green, white, and red instead. Are these not the colours of Italy? Dirty dog, Mussolini. . . . The other side of the wall, hammering. Without ceasing for a single moment, tack, tack, tack, tack, tack. I can hear it distinctly, coming not from the wall but from within my own head. I wonder why. Tack, tack, tack. A large window, a vast expanse of plate glass, as in a sanatorium in Switzerland—how lavish they are in the Air Force. A six-tonner truck came to meet me when I first joined the R.A.F.; can't have done more than five or six miles to the gallon. How wet and cold it was that morning; and I had deliberately left my umbrella behind; and how nervous I had felt, and how excited; and those endless turnip fields, miles and miles of them. Outside the window—yes, plateglass—outside the window, a staff car and a builder's lorry piled high with rubble. Their wheels sunk deep in the mud. No, it's clay. Roses will do well should they ever decide to have a garden round H.Q. I could make myself quite useful if they'd let me plan the garden. Far away, the other side of the camp, beyond the distant moors—pink and mauve and lavender—indistinctly, a soldierly face. Haven't I seen it somewhere before? It is many miles away, and yet I notice distinctly the nervous twitch of the left eyelid. Or is it my own? What nonsense. The eye is blue, and mine are . . . I wish I could remember. I can't remember anything. I seem to need some leave and a good rest. All I now see is a blue eye, staring at me. Wasn't his name Corring, an Air Marshal? How blue his eyes were. And a minute camp bed stood in a corner of his enormous study. I wonder how he got here. But then they always move people about from one station to another. Is this his voice? It sounds very distant, but it isn't Corring's. Yet I can hear the words quite distinctly. Words, words, and more still. Tack, tack, tack, tack. They seem to mean absolutely nothing. Tack, tack, tack, they sound. But the yellow blotting-paper on the table, the colour of jaundice, is real, in fact it is the only real thing in the room and obliterates the speaker completely from my view. Yes, sir, no, sir, very well, sir. Did you say something? A stammering voice. What a feeble, hopeless voice; it has always been hopeless in self-defence. You should have been a barrister, R.L., Group Captain Windlow said a hundred years ago. How the time flies. To defend others; never defend yourself. If you don't defend yourself the waves pass through you and nothing is left behind, if you do—they turn into stones with sharp edges and leave wounds behind. And then I hear a rude voice. What? It's my own? How incredible! Naughty, naughty, don't you know that junior officers don't speak like that to their superiors? You haven't learned dis-

cipline, old man. How long have you been in the service? What, since the beginning of the war? Well, then you ought to know better. Yes, I agree entirely. Moreover, you have always been extremely kind to me and I respect you greatly. My application for transfer? There is the waste-paper basket. Is not this the end? The beginning was twelve months ago. Or a thousand years. So why an application, why this interview? A last straw, you say? Have it your own way, old man, but it's a broken straw. Tack, tack, tack, tack, and words become more and more meaningless. Dreams never have any meaning, except in books written by clever professors from Vienna. They only become real when we wake up. But this is sombre slumber. How far off the morning is. Oh, if I could only wake up, just for a single moment. I would give anything if I could only wake up. I have always been afraid of dreams. If they are pleasant they are followed by disappointment, and if they are unpleasant they frighten me. Good morning, sir. Or is it good evening? No, for I can still see the jaundice and thousands of slimy grey worms crawling underneath it. This is the way out, and this is the corridor. On the door opposite, in heavy black letters, 'Wing. Com. Admin.' I wonder whether my draft of 'Regulations for Ops. room Procedure' with two carbon copies is still on his table. I believe the Wing Commander is a first-rate shot. On the right, further down, three steps leading to Ops. room. With switchboards all facing in the wrong direction, and so enormous that they even blot the sun out. Miles of cables straggling across the floor. On the left, the room in which they lecture about salmon and trout and fishing tackle. The lecturer is a black-skinned Air Commodore from Jamaica, in bright new tweeds and with a strong Cockney accent. Do all Cockneys drop their Rs? Everything you touch in the room is covered with a film of white dust. How funny he looks with his crinkly hair all covered with white dust.

Hours crawl as monotonously as the flies on the large window pane of the Swiss sanatorium. I didn't know they send you to a sanatorium for jaundice; I thought only for T.B. Anyhow, I hate sanatoria. I once read a novel by a famous German author, eight hundred pages of it, and nothing but sanatoria and T.B. Only a German could write such stuff. A drive from H.Q. across moors to the mess. And back again. And back, and back. Tack, tack, tack, the A.O.C. will forward your plea for resignation. Thank you. The Air Commodore has gwaciously gwanted me leave until the moment of the Air Ministwy's final decision. How vewy kind. Who makes the decision? Air Chief Marshals closeted together in secret conclave? Or the bespectacled Flight Lieutenant in that little room piled high with files? 'I'm awfully sorry, old man, but I'm really not responsible for your posting. I can only tell you what has been decided for you by the higher ups.' I don't care a damn; I'm an air-gunner, do you understand, an AIR-GUNNER! You can't do that to me. Why should they have given me the wing if I'm not to fly? The wing . . . I never felt so proud in all my life. Luckily, it is still on my tunic, for everyone to see. 'What a wizard score, right on top of us, ninety per cent.' Ninety per cent, right on top, but what for? You can't do that to me. 'I'm sorry, old man, but I have

really nothing to do with it.' Since my entire time on the mountain top consisted of a state of semi-leave, you can tell your Air Commodore with my compliments that it doesn't much matter whether he's granting me leave or not. The difference isn't likely to be a very marked one. Tack, tack, tack. Why won't they ever stop hammering?

'I expected it to happen much sooner,' one of my colleagues said in the mess. 'The one gift you need for a staff job, old man, is a smilin' face. A smilin' face'll take you anywhere. Goldbraid like imaginin' they're fairy godmothers who make you feel happy, even if you really feel like hell.' And he laughed. I had no desire to laugh and I did feel like hell. I did not even feel any better for the news that two of my Ops. colleagues had applied for transfer, that two others were being sent away to other stations, and that a fifth one had decided to resign.

XII

The human soul is a strange thing, illumined by visions of truth and happiness that within a few seconds will be discarded; with voices ringing clear and loud at one moment and hardly audible the next; guided by longings that the heart feels before the mind has even begun to be aware of them; full of conflicting currents surging relentlessly through it; a battlefield across which reason wages war not only with emotions but with itself as well.

I had sent in my resignation, but the last thing I wanted was to leave the R.A.F., the service that I had loved and admired from the very moment I first joined it. In the evening after my final interview, I withdrew immediately after dinner and for several hours paced up and down my bedroom. By three in the morning I no longer quite knew what I really wanted. In spite of the fact that for several months I had considered the separation inevitable, something in me continued to cling to the idea that I might yet remain in the service. It was just as in a dream when you feel yourself falling deeper and deeper; you imagine that no power on earth can stay your fall, yet you know that if only you could cry out or scream you would be saved.

I sat down at my table and began to draft a long letter to Braynelaw and Corring, telling them of what had happened but also imploring them to let me remain in the service, and once again recapitulating all the jobs for which I felt I was suitable. Was there, in spite of my most recent decision, no chance of my being given a transfer? When I had finished writing, dawn was breaking and I was as in a fever. Yet I sealed the letters and later on posted them. The envelopes disappeared in the letter box. Another of those vain attempts behind the screen of which I had for the last few months been trying to fool myself. I ought not to have pestered the two men who had shown me so much patience and kindness. What was it that I had written to them? I could no longer remember. But it didn't matter. No-one could stay the hand of fate.

XIII

Once again a day of parting. Once again a stranger. His last day in the tranquil house among the moors. Low clouds upon the land, trailing veils over the brown moors. He had to finish packing and wasn't leaving the mess with the others who were boarding the bus that would take them to the vacuum on the mountain top.

The last of his possessions that he picked up to put in the suitcase was his Bible. The stranger opened it idly and his eye fell on some lines of a psalm. 'Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us', the psalmist prayed, 'and the years wherein we have seen evil.' He had vaguely hoped that a passage in the Bible might possibly convey some special message for the occasion, but the psalmist's words meant nothing to him and he closed the book and put it on top of his other belongings. Then he shut the suitcases and carried them downstairs.

On the landing of the first floor, surrounded by an ornate balustrade of waxed oak, he had to squeeze his way between a suit of medieval armour, black, shining, on a pedestal draped in tartan, and a stuffed peacock, its blue tail spread out in a huge wheel, one of its glass eyes missing. The wooden block on which it was perched in all its impotence and vanity, had a little brass plate affixed to it. Never before had he troubled to look at the message the brass plate might bear, but he was in no hurry, so he put his luggage down and stooped to decipher the blackened inscription. 'Dodo, the Great. 1899.' Was this the year of Dodo's death, of its birth, or of its greatest triumph, he wondered for a few seconds, picked up the suitcases and continued downstairs.

The hall was empty, and so was the library adjoining it. The stranger had plenty of time—was he not a free man?—and walking up to the wireless, switched it on. A screeching jazz tune resounded from the instrument and he hurriedly turned it off again. Then he approached one of the many bookshelves, pulled out a book at random and opened it. He was hardly aware of what he was doing and unthinkingly looked down at the opened page. The words his eyes met were, 'Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.' He woke up for a moment and re-read the sentence. But he hadn't been dreaming: it was the same sentence he had read a few minutes earlier in his bedroom. The book was an eighteenth-century edition of the Psalms, bound in fawn-coloured, well-worn leather, with the crest of the owner of the house on the fly leaf. He read the sentence a third time, but still it bore no message for him. He closed the book and pushed it back whence he had taken it. Next to it was a volume of a pre-war R.A.F. Year Book which must have belonged to one of his colleagues. He pulled it out and in that very second he knew as if suddenly mastering some psychic sense where it would open. There was not a quiver of surprise in him that the words facing him at the top of the page should read, 'R.A.F. Station, Manhill, Suffolk. 941 and 00 Squadrons. Commanding Officer . . . Group

Captain . . . 'Was not the whole morning a dream? And are not dreams servants as well as masters? Sometimes we conjure up in them whatever visions we desire. But why 'make us glad'? This, he couldn't understand, and for a moment felt troubled by his lack of comprehension. Glad? His sorrow was surging through him like the waves of a choking sea. And it was not mitigated by the fact that in his solitariness he saw everything as if it were softened by a tender glow. Everything, that only twenty-four hours previously had exasperated him, had lost its harshness. Suddenly he remembered that his bedroom which had always seemed to him unbearably cold—with night mists and early morning frosts—had been exceptionally comfortable and with a view upon moors and the reddening trees of autumn. And his colleagues, though their perpetual fishing gossip had seemed beyond him, were a decent lot, had been obliging and sympathetic. Oh, fool, you should have remembered all this a day earlier. Yet what else could the fool have done? Was he the player, or the pawn in a game whose directing hand was unknown to him?

For a last time he looked round the library with its hundreds of handsomely bound tomes, and above them on the walls, prints of horses, stags, and lion hunts. Involuntarily his eye fell again on the little fawn-coloured leather binding almost hidden beside the big blue R.A.F. book. But he still could find no response in himself to the palmist's unfathomable prayer.

He walked across the garden to the garage in which he kept his car, brought it to the entrance of the house, and with the help of two batmen piled the luggage in.

XIV

As soon as I knew for certain that I was to be granted leave, I got into touch with some people whom I had met a few weeks previously and who on several occasions had asked me to spend whatever leave I might get at their estate, some thirty miles from our H.Q. I inquired whether their invitation still held good, and they kindly repeated it. So from the mess I drove straight across the moors, with the waters of many lochs suddenly opening up below and the sharp ridges of multi-coloured mountains painting wide-swung horizons.

During my first week at Kinlarich, the harvest, more than six weeks later than in Sussex, was in full swing, and I spent several hours each day stooking in the fields. The work of stooking the bundles of rye and wheat and of lifting them with a long fork on to the wagons was exhausting and cut out all thought, for which I was thankful. The air, blowing from the near-by kyle, from woods, and moors, was strong as wine and helped to bring sleep at night. I was distressed therefore when after the first week, a neglected elbow that I had injured earlier in the year when on a particularly rough day I was thrown heavily against my gun turret in a Hampden, suddenly became painful and forced me to stop all heavy work.

When after a few days the pain became so acute that it kept me awake all through the night, I went to town to the hospital and had the elbow X-rayed, but the slight shadow on the photograph was too indecisive to enlighten the doctor fully and apart from bandaging my arm, all he could advise me to do was to move about as little as possible, which may have been good for the arm but was not helpful to the troubled mind. And only by unrelenting effort could I force myself not to think: the one thing I was afraid of. I knew that I could not continue to live in the somnambulant state into which I had tried to escape ever since the night in the mess that I had spent pacing up and down my room, but as yet I was too cowardly to face an awakening. Had I been addicted to drink, I could have easily wiped out the conscious mind for at least half of my waking time. As it was, my sort of intoxication had to be worked for more strenuously. I went for brisk and exhausting walks up the steep moors; I read at a rate of more than a book a day; I spent the entire evenings playing games with my hosts, a pastime for which in earlier days I had expressed almost contempt. But I didn't dare to open my Bible which I had once been in the habit of reading every night. Nor to pray. For prayer is the first step into reality. And that was the one thing I had not the courage to face.

XV

During my third week at Kinlarich I went to visit B., and as I was wandering through the street of the little town I suddenly met Dalmally, one of my fellow air-gunners at Bentley. He was chief air-gunner in a Sunderland squadron up in the Shetlands but had come south to train a batch of new air-gunners who had only just finished their schooling and were to join his squadron.

'What are you doing?' Dalmally asked.

'I'm on leave,' and I blushed violently.

'No, I mean at this moment.'

'Nothing in particular.'

'Why don't you come up with us in a Sunderland?'

'There's nothing I should love more', and I felt like a child that has suddenly been offered a beautiful present.

His three Sunderlands were moored in the middle of the narrow loch, not far from the main street. We stepped into a motor launch and within a few minutes were on board one of the giant planes. The first person to greet me was a newly baked sergeant air-gunner whom I recognized as one of our armourers at Sandfield. I congratulated him on his fine advance and his wing, and we shook hands. He beamed all over his face and replied, 'I hope, sir, you've had a similar success'. I looked away and then stepped into the machine.

Within a few minutes the engines started roaring and the huge bird glided ever more rapidly, lifting and falling upon the waves and raising excited jets of white spray from the loch. Gently we left the surface of the water and imperceptibly were in the air. We flew out towards the open

sea, a grey and angry expanse of turbulent water, and the air-gunners, sitting in their various turrets as if in the separate rooms of a house, fired at the special sea targets.

My hands were itching to grip the gun handles, and I seemed to be experiencing the full glory of the summer days at Bentley. As if guessing my thoughts, Dalmally asked me whether I would care to try out the guns. He was terribly proud of his Sunderlands and naturally wanted me to experience the 'superiority' of his aircraft over the Wellingtons and Hampdens in which we had worked together at Bentley. But the paradise was lost, and to sink myself yet more deeply in its illusion was more than I felt capable of. So I excused myself by saying that I had an injured arm which for the moment made it impossible for me to handle a gun. 'Well, you'll have to do it next time you come. I'll probably have to stay here for another month.'

On our way back one of the sergeants invited us into the gully where another one was preparing the crew's 'high tea'. He was frying trout that they themselves had caught the same morning, and potato chips, and opening tins of Californian peaches. Before we reached our base, we sat down to the excellent meal. Our party consisted of four sergeants, one Pilot Officer, Dalmally who was a Flying Officer, and myself, but there was nothing to suggest distinction of rank or of anything else. The cheerful atmosphere and natural *camaraderie* added to the bitter-sweetness of the whole experience.

Before I left the aircraft, the air-gunner from Sandfield said, 'You must come again, sir, and next time we shan't let you off so lightly; you'll have to fire with us, and we'll run a sweepstake.'

'Of course you must,' Dalmally echoed his words.

'I shall love to', I tried to smile. But before leaving I shook hands with everyone on board. I knew I should never see them again.

Dalmally came on shore with me, and invited me to lunch with him and the 'other boys' next day at the little hotel where they were billeted. I thanked him, but lied to the effect that I should be leaving on the following morning. I didn't have the courage to tell him the truth. I didn't have the courage to face the truth myself. When at night I lay awake, which happened frequently, my mind would circle ceaselessly round the childish thought: perhaps they won't accept my resignation after all.

XVI

After a month's waiting I was rung up by H.Q. to be informed that a signal had just arrived announcing that my resignation had been accepted, with effect from a date three days later. So in another seventy-two hours I would have seen the last of my uniform with the proud wing on the breast.

When on that summer morning in London I had felt for the first time that the link had snapped, I had not imagined that the actual break would be so painful. I didn't seem fully to realize then what the R.A.F. mea-

me, single-mindedness, companionship, integrity, selflessness, youth; that it had become to me more than home and family and everything else one holds dear. Or perhaps because in reality I did know all this, from that day onwards I felt less and less able to pluck up heart to face the truth fully. So long as the last material link with the service remained and I wore my uniform and was still officially a member of the R.A.F., my mind simply refused to face the break. I should first have to sweep aside the last remnants of that association. And to do so I would have to escape to some place where nothing would remind me of the Air Force. Only then might I find the courage to open my eyes and behold what hangs by the wall.

Though it was I who had made the break inevitable, and though I knew that if blame there was it was solely my own, I was nevertheless surprised that they should have let me go. The ease with which they had done so was not flattering to whatever vanity I might have retained. Even if my actual achievement had been pretty poor, my goodwill and the enthusiasm with which I had thrown up my private life might possibly have been appreciated. Yet by whom? By the impersonal machine called this or that Air Council to whom I was yet another number, or by the red tape that had become the chief governor and guardian of our fates? Did I really expect that at a time when the nation was fighting for its very existence, and when the only thing that counted was the visible record of your achievement, anyone would bother with the good intentions or sentiments of one insignificant cog?

XVII

DIARY

Am sitting in the tiniest attic room I have ever set eyes upon, in a hotel on the outskirts of the town above which H.Q. of O Group is situated. It is a cheap little hotel and mine is its cheapest room, but now that I am an unemployed civilian and no longer receive any regular pay I must consider every penny.

My civilian work having come to an end the moment I joined up, I was for all this year entirely dependent upon my service pay. Though in most of my jobs I was employed as a Flight Lieutenant and had to pay mess subscription, etc. according to that rank, for the greatest part of the time I only received the pay of a Pilot Officer, and after a year in the service find that I have had to dip deep into my meagre pre-war savings. Fool that I was, on my countless duty journeys to London I hardly ever claimed expenses, and, altogether, my year in the R.A.F. has been anything but cheap. I leave the service much poorer than I was when I joined up. With no prospects of immediate work, I shall have to reduce my standard of living by several degrees. Fortunately my sense of humour hasn't entirely deserted me, and I find something highly entertaining in contemplating the contrast between my present situation and that of the last few weeks. Until yesterday I slept in a canopied eighteenth-century bed, had my own bathroom, and enjoyed every luxury that the home of cultured and rich people could provide. In the

morning my hostess would ask me whether I would have grouse rather than chicken, duck, or pigeon for dinner, and for breakfast hothouse peaches and grapes would await me on the table.

My service status expired at midnight and H.Q. had ordered me to call there during the morning to settle the necessary clearance papers and all that went with them. I left Kinlarich early in the morning and reached H.Q. by ten. Everything went surprisingly smoothly and the few administrative officers were obliging and helpful. By eleven I was ready to start back for Kinlarich when the adjutant stopped me. 'By the way,' he said, 'we must have your R.A.F. identity card back.' 'I cannot deliver it yet,' I replied. 'I am staying at present with friends in one of the prohibited areas which cannot be entered without a service identity card or a special police permit.' 'Now that you are a civilian you must secure such a permit.' 'That takes three weeks at least.' 'I am afraid we must have your identity card back.' Finally, he dispatched one of my former colleagues with me to call on the relevant military authorities in town and to secure from them the necessary permit that would enable me to hand back my R.A.F. card and yet return home.

But the Major at one of the innumerable military H.Q. was adamant: now that I was a civilian he could do nothing for me. I must apply to the civil authorities at Edinburgh. 'But I have nowhere else to stay,' I tried to explain the situation to him, 'and all my clothes and other possessions are at Kinlarich. Moreover, to-day being Sunday, I couldn't even buy a razor or a toothbrush.' But the pot-bellied and bald-headed Major would not yield an inch. Finally we rang up Group H.Q. and the adjutant gave me permission to retain my service card in order to reach Kinlarich and collect my belongings. 'But you must be back at H.Q. before midnight to deliver your card,' he warned me.

I returned to Kinlarich in the afternoon—having had no food since seven in the morning—packed my things, had a quick cup of tea, and drove back across the moors, arriving in town after 7 p.m. I went straight to H.Q. and left my identity card with the service policeman at the door, a sergeant with whom I had once or twice exchanged a few words.

'I'm sorry you're leaving us, sir,' he said, and then, turning a kindly face towards me, added, 'I wish you weren't.'

I wanted to thank him but instead made some futile joke and withdrew in a hurry. His was the only farewell I had received on the last day, and it made me feel cowardly and sentimental. But on my way back to town it gave me comfort to think that there were perhaps just a few men at H.Q. whose feelings might have been contained in the policeman's good-bye.

I returned from H.Q. straight to my attic, containing an iron bed, a chair, and a minute basin and jug placed on another chair. In an attempt to get accustomed to my new state, I decided not to indulge in the luxury of dinner and feasted on a twopenny bar of chocolate and a bun. In the spirit of self-castigation which had so suddenly descended upon me, I derived a certain perverse enjoyment from this unforeseen social and

economic descent. And it was useful to learn that there existed realities beyond those experienced by the mind alone.

XVIII

Life saw to it that I should experience my share of reality without much loss of time. The return to civilian life wasn't quite as easy as I might have anticipated, not that I had ever given much thought to that circumstance. For a year, I had not had to bother about such details as the room in which I was to sleep, my next meal or bath, my railway ticket, or how much any of these would cost. As for ration cards, they were anathema to me. Once I had become a civilian, all this changed. But even before I could start worrying about the innumerable details of daily existence I had in the first place to establish my new status. And that was by no means an easy task.

After having been vacant for many months, my house at Stoughton had only just been let and as I had nowhere else to go to, I had been looking forward to returning to Kinlarich. I thought I'd stay there at least until I had found my new bearings, but before I could go there I had to obtain the special permit from Edinburgh, and before I could apply for one I had to secure an identity card. Fortunately, I still possessed two civilian photographs which would presumably enable the authorities to provide me instantly with that document.

When I handed my two peace-time passport photographs to the registrar, he said, 'Sorry, we can't use these.'

'Why not?' I inquired.

'They don't show your left ear.'

'What does that matter?'

'Well, you may be disguising the loss of one ear.'

'But I have got both ears and don't wish to disguise either of them.'

'I understand; but you *might* have one ear only and this photograph would conceal that fact.'

I knew that arguing with officialdom on a basis of common sense was a futile task, so I gave up, and trotted off to the nearest photographer.

'Passport photographs is what you want?' the old man replied to my request in an offended voice. 'Och, I couldn't take those to-day.'

'But there are lots of passport photographs in your window,' I tried to encourage him.

'Aye, aye, them's passport photographs; but I couldn't take them now.'

'Could you take them later in the day?' I inquired.

'Aye, aye,' he went on, 'passport photographs. Lots of people wants them passport photographs. But I couldn't take them, not for a week, not for a fortnight', and after first glancing in the direction of the huge camera that was standing in the middle of the room, he gave me a look as though I had said something terribly offensive.

I couldn't make the queer bird out and left him to the enjoyment of his discontent.

At the next photographer's I was assured that I would get my pictures within two days.

As soon as I realized that the formalities would prevent me from returning to Kinlarich, I decided to seek some quiet little inn or hotel not far away yet sufficiently distant to ensure that I would not meet anyone I knew and especially any members of the R.A.F. Though outwardly I might have pretended that everything was 'wizard' and though even my one or two friends saw only an expression of composed indifference, I had lived in a state of perpetual nervous tension ever since the original Air Ministry decision. I slept even less well than I normally did, seldom getting more than three hours' sleep at night. Most of the time I lay in a state of semi-somnolence, with distorted thoughts and images racing through a feverish mind. But it was only during my first day as a civilian that I fully realized the state that I was in. Though I made every effort to go about as though nothing had happened and as though civilian status were the only one I had ever been accustomed to, the sight of the Air Force uniform in the streets became unbearable to me. 'I feel queerly homesick whenever I see a blue uniform in the street,' wrote T. E. Lawrence, after he had left the R.A.F. This must have been an understatement. The very first airman I came across brought a lump to my throat. Don't be a sentimental fool, I said to myself, determined not to be swept off my feet by the inner tempest. But the sight of the second wearer of the grey-blue uniform produced the identical effect, and bewilderment was added to other emotions. The man was a corporal from my late H.Q., and when he recognized me saluted smartly. During their fishing expeditions or on similar occasions, all our officers were wont to appear in mufti and the airmen were accustomed to meet them in that state. I instinctively saluted back, without remembering that I was wearing mufti and was a civilian not entitled to a salute. What was I to do when others saluted me, I wondered: respond, or rudely pretend that I hadn't noticed the salute? Whatever I might have thought of some of my own colleagues, I had always felt respect and affection for our airmen, most of whom represented to me the very salt of the earth. On occasions, I didn't mind pretending that I hadn't noticed this Group Captain or that Air Commodore in the street, but I couldn't remember a single occasion on which I had not acknowledged the salute of an airman.

The wearers of the R.A.F. uniform were not the only reason why I desired to escape as soon as possible. Everything about me in a town that I had learned to know so well, made me feel a refugee. Though my weeks at H.Q. had been a time of idleness, it was a regulated idleness and I could delude myself into believing that I was part of the machinery of war. Once out of it all, I felt superfluous. While everyone around was or, at least, seemed to be attending to some business and belonging to some ordered scheme of things, there was no rhyme or reason in my existence. In time, I might get used to the new kind of life, but it seemed impossible to do so immediately, after a year, most of which had been crammed with

work, clearly defined duties, and a regular time-table. I felt shy of meeting my former colleagues. However much some of them might sympathize with my point of view, I felt certain that once I had left their company they would regard me as a deserter. The fact of anyone giving up a safe job with regular pay, a rank and the privileges that it entailed, the comforts that went with an officer's status, and, last but not least, the consciousness of belonging to that branch of the war machine that happened to be the most popular at the moment—this must have struck them as verging on madness. Yet however miserable I might feel, I still knew in my heart that I would rather be a homeless renegade and loyal to that inner voice that I believed spoke to me in the compelling language of truth than be a sham: a sham officer and a sham servant of the cause for which I had been ready to sacrifice all.

XIX

Though I had not yet had the courage to face squarely the fact of my resignation, I prayed again on the day that I became a civilian once more. Even at the time of the most profound bewilderment I had never doubted that whatever had happened and was to happen was in higher hands. There must be some purpose behind it all, and I should have to make every effort to try to comprehend it, even if only partially. But to begin with, I must get away from the surroundings and the reminders of my most recent past. Without some measure of inner peace, all my knocking at the door would be in vain.

It was not only the countless forms that I had to fill in, the number of offices that I had to visit, the questions I was asked, that made me say to myself, after my first forty-eight hours as a civilian, 'This is almost like life under the Gestapo'. After my pukka sahib existence of the past year when I had entered some of the most secret chambers of our war effort and crossed every frontier of the prohibited zones, the restrictions I was suddenly up against came as a painful surprise. And I became truly alarmed on the second day, after a visit to a friend, an army officer who was employed in one of the innumerable Intelligence departments.

My friend was one of the few people whom I had immediately informed of my latest step. Since the guard at the entrance to his H.Q. knew me well he let me pass, but my friend asked me to follow him into the street. On our way downstairs he whispered, 'Every wall in this building has ears, so I thought we'd be safer outside'.

'Who was the woman you gave a lift to yesterday?' he asked me when we were in the street.

My face remained blank.

'I hear she's a Frenchwoman', he continued, 'who's staying in your hotel, and that yesterday she listened to a telephone conversation which you had with B. from the lounge. Later on you took her along in your car.'

This was beginning to be like a detective thriller. 'Listen, Jack,' I said, 'you are either drunk or crazy. I haven't spoken to a single soul at my hotel except the manager, and I haven't given any woman, French or Hottentot, a lift. Where do you get all this Sherlock Holmes stuff from?'

'I only want to warn you,' my friend lowered his voice. 'You're being followed and one of the observers has taken the report about you and the woman to the head of his department.'

'Good gracious, you don't listen to that sort of gossip, I hope? I don't know a soul here and it was on your recommendation that I went to that particular hotel. Not only have I given no female a lift, but I wasn't using my car at all yesterday, as anyone can easily find out from the garage. I didn't even go near the place.'

'I know the report about you is undiluted rubbish, or manure, if you prefer it. The gentleman at the telephone for whom our budding Nick Carters mistook you is the new dentist who is waiting to move into his new flat, and the French master-spy is a poor refugee from Jersey who anyhow is stone-deaf. But I wanted to put you wise. For never in the whole of our history have so many wasted so much time in sniffing out the affairs of so few,' he laughed. 'You mustn't forget that it is one of the supreme tasks of our temporary civil servants—of both sexes—to clutter up our war machinery so completely that in the end we might lose the war with a clear conscience. But joking apart, nowhere in the country is there so much malicious gossip and intrigue as here. Before the war, when this town belonged to the Scots who are much too sensible to poke their noses into anyone else's affairs, you could do anything you pleased. But since the beginning of the war, the Sassenachs have invaded this defenceless town, and English suburbia and hypocrisy, usually in the shape of Intelligence—mark the word, intelligence—officers and agents, have the entire field to themselves. Most of them have been educated almost exclusively on American films and the lower type of thrillers, and they are unable to view life in any other terms. They are simply tumbling over one another, and of course they've got nothing to do. Your resignation which they ferreted out instantly is a godsend to them. At last they have a fine stag to stalk: an officer who voluntarily leaves the service, even though to all appearances he has no other job, and who moves into the cheapest room in one of the cheapest hotels. You must admit you're the perfect character for one of the innumerable parts that our clever lads are waiting impatiently to assign to you. At present they're still guessing whether your plans are to blow up the Navy, murder all the existing Air Marshals, or preach sedition to the Army. But once again, I warn you. Any word you address to anyone, if you sneeze, if you look at your watch, anything and everything will be used against you.'

'But I don't sneeze and I don't address anyone. All I've been doing is to spend endless hours in the various offices in which I'm trying to get my identity card and ration book. And, as I told you before, the moment I get my photographs and all my civilian documents, I want to leave this place.'

'Where will you go?'

'Anywhere in the country where I can find a cheap and fairly decent inn or hotel and where I don't need to see anyone. Do you know of such a place?'

My friend, who knew everyone and everything, advised me to get in touch with the owner of a little hotel on Loch Ness which, though far away, was apparently the very refuge I needed.

It was indeed ironical that I, who for years past had been warning my friends and, for the last twelve months, my superiors and colleagues, against the danger of German methods, German infiltration, and the spirit behind all their moves, should suddenly find myself being followed by secret agents. But though the entire subject was fit for a farce, I didn't feel much like laughter. For a year I had been allowed to work in some of the most secret departments of the service and had handled secret documents. Because I had exchanged the blue uniform for a plain tweed suit, all the confidence that had been placed in me and that was based on the record of a lifetime had evaporated. A world at war is certainly a mad world, but it needed all my sense of humour not to view my affairs in the light of melodrama.

XX

On the third day after my return to civilian life I finally managed to escape from the town in which I suspected every other person walking behind me of belonging to the valiant brigade of 'the many who followed the few'. I was glad to brush the dust of the town from my feet, and even the unexpected reaction of the bespectacled and kilted registrar who only two days before had argued so emphatically about the impropriety of my 'missing' ear, did little to kindle in my breast new sparks of affection for a place which henceforward was always to be associated in my mind with my separation from the service.

My two new photographs and my various forms of application were at last irreproachable, and after examining them for a while, the registrar suddenly barked at me, 'Do you write books?'


This was so unexpected that for several seconds I hesitated, scarcely knowing what answer to give, but since the vigilant eye of the authorities must already have penetrated every recess of my past and present life, denials seemed of little avail, and I meekly admitted that before the war I had indulged in that equivocal occupation.

'I've read several of your books', the registrar remarked, while applying with vigour a number of different-sized rubber stamps to the multitude of papers in front of him, 'and jolly good books they are'.

All this happened so surprisingly that I merely managed to acknowledge the compliment with a sheepish grin.

On the previous day I had rung up the manager of the hotel on Loch Ness and though the price was rather more than I felt I could afford, I ordered a room, and reached my new refuge before dinner.

For the last few miles I drove along Loch Ness with steep hills and darkening woods rising from the water on each side. The hotel, a simple but attractive-looking building, was perched half-way up the hill overlooking the loch. Both to the right and to the left as far as the eye could reach there was the narrow snake of dark water and rock and moor rising above it. No houses or other signs of human habitation were anywhere visible, and the position was as desolate as any I had ever seen. The view from my room had all the colour and vigour to be expected from a truly romantic type of scenery. Yet there was nothing theatrical about it, and its rugged virility was not sufficiently austere to be oppressive. I found myself falling completely under the spell of the landscape and felt thankful for my friend's advice.



Epilogue

MEDITATIONS ON LOCH NESS

I

My instinct to escape from the scene of my latest R.A.F. associations and from human company in general proved to be a sound one. To practically all of us there comes a moment when we discover that in order to find ourselves we have to part company with everyone else. The healing properties of solitude may be inseparable from pain but in the end they seem to be of a more radically beneficial nature than those of human company. However dark the night through which I had been wandering for many bewildering weeks, I had dimly felt that somewhere there was light and that its power could only be made manifest through my own awakening. So long as I had been grappling with external events I had felt too fearful and too weak to bring about such an awakening, but as soon as I was dissociated from the conflicting influences of my most recent past, I felt that the decisive moment was at hand.

Whether it was mere chance that had led me to the desolate spot above Loch Ness or not, the choice proved a right one, and what for many weeks had seemed beyond me, came about quite naturally in the peace of my new refuge. As so often before in my life, Nature proved the most helpful father confessor. Even while still in the service, I had often been vaguely aware that however depressing the events that had finally led to complete frustration, their primary cause could lie nowhere else but within myself.

During the very first few days at Lochrunnie, spent in wandering over the silent moors, every voice which for months I had been trying to silence rang out with compelling clarity. Did you not know, the voices seemed to cry, that life on the material plane is only a reflection of the life within; that the external world is but an image of that moulded by the longings and discontents of the soul; that there can be no steep descent in the world of transient things that is not preceded by a corresponding abasement of the spirit? Is not the universe the mirror of man, just as within the narrow compass of his being man carries the key to all the mysteries of the universe? Microcosm and macrocosm are not two uncorrelated worlds but facets of the selfsame truth. For years I had known that this was so, but during the past twelve months I had preferred to lay the blame for every setback that I had encountered at the door of external events, of mischances or uncongenial surroundings. And though my mind undoubtedly received a shock when at last I acknowledged to myself that I had been the chief architect of my own descent, deep down within I had always known—at Sleethole, at Oldfort, and during the last inactive

weeks in the 'vacuum' on the mountain top—that there could be no other explanation to my experiences in the R.A.F.

II

DIARY

There is but one sin, and it is disloyalty to one's principles and ideals. Everything can be forgiven and forgotten bar such betrayal. When we are compelled to taste of its bitter fruit, there is no place in heaven or on earth where we can escape its consequences.

Why am I to-day more alone than I have ever been? Because I had become disloyal to principles that I knew to be valid and to ideals without which there could be nothing but retrogression. Though I had learned in the past that no treasures could be found in life unless the self had first been lost, I had allowed the selflessness of a year ago to become overgrown by the weeds of egotism. Instead of keeping in mind the aim for the sake of which I had joined the service, I had moved along with my nose in the air, brooding over the inadequacy of my work, and weighing up the 'superiority' of my gifts over the tasks assigned to me. In sinking ever more deeply into egotism, I had become oblivious of my true ideals. I should have known that the right job cannot come our way if the ambitious self chases after it. It can be ours only if we meet it with a pure heart. I should have known that the unfavourable circumstances would no doubt have improved had I paid less attention to them.

Must I remind myself that my happiest days in the R.A.F. were those when the thought of self never distorted my vision and all that mattered to me was how to make myself most useful in my new vocation? Need I remind myself that it was in the early days at Manhill and the later ones at Bentley that I encountered all that was best and finest in the R.A.F., that I made friends, revelled in the sense of being a member of a community, and hardly ever wished to be in touch with anyone outside my own team? Was it not my own enthusiasm of those precious days that had enabled fate to place me in such perfect surroundings? It was not Manhill, not Bentley, as such that was so far superior to any other place; it was also I who had made them so for me.

In spite of everything, I can hold neither circumstances nor 'bad luck' responsible for the gradual deterioration both of my position and of the nature of my work. From work that was interesting and even modestly important, from work that was eminently satisfying and exhilarating, I slid down to the dreariest of occupations, until in the end I found myself completely idle. Was this descent imposed upon me from outside? Were Air Marshals or Adjutants, this Posting Department or that commanding officer solely responsible for it? Of course they were not; they were mere tools in the hands of fate, used by her to accelerate my decline. It was not from deliberate malice that they did this or that, posted me to one station, then revoked their decision, or selected me for this or that job. They acted as they did because something within myself—fading enthusiasm, too critical a spirit?—left fate no option but to use them in the manner she did.

Ignorance alone may possibly have saved me from what I now begin to recognize not so much as a physical but rather a spiritual decline. The possession of principles and ideals, and the knowledge that this implies, impose responsibilities. So I can only wonder sadly at some growing disloyalty to truths that in my innermost heart I had never ceased to regard as valid. How was it possible for me to forget—as I evidently did—that neither on the spiritual nor the physical plane could there be progress without daily struggle; that my growing preoccupation with non-essentials and my criticism of surrounding conditions were bound to lead to the final impasse?

III

DIARY

I have spent part of the day climbing the hills overlooking the loch, and part reading. Have also written to several friends in the south asking if there is any chance of securing some war job. By severing my links with the R.A.F. I find myself for the first time completely dissociated from the one all-overshadowing theme of the moment. And to be thus dissociated from the prosecution of the war is tantamount to living in a world of unreality. Having joined up very early in the war, I feel rather lost in this sudden vacuum which makes my civilian life seem even more senseless than perhaps it is. I find myself the less prepared for this state, since even long before September 1939 the idea of war had already become the cruz of my life, dominating both my work and my entire spiritual horizon. I had been feverishly anxious to play my part in it; yet I realize now that once I became privileged to do so I concentrated more and more on that individual part and less and less on the war itself. I came to regard the latter as the background to my own service career and to assess it in terms of my own petty problems. This might have been understandable had I been ambitious or thirsting for power, but being neither by nature, I can only explain my attitude as due to some spiritual sloth, to that vis inertiae, that to a man with spiritual principles is a greater danger than any vice however undiluted. In such a condition of spiritual sloth, it is easy enough for every vision of truth to become blurred and replaced by an egotism that is the more dangerous for being at first imperceptible. In consequence, instead of accepting my position exclusively in terms of service, I allowed my thoughts to dwell upon the jobs I should have had, the rank to which I felt entitled, the inadequacy of my colleagues or of the mess. For the same reason I was oblivious to the innumerable privileges that I enjoyed. Many others had to identify themselves with the drabest, heaviest, or most dangerous aspects of the war effort, but I was fortunate to enjoy some of its most attractive ones, without, however, by my attitude or effort showing much appreciation of these.

Attached to the most inspiring and, probably, most active of all the services, I was in a position to feel the pulse of the war, without ever being stunned by any of the blows that so many R.A.F. men had received. Thanks to the great variety of my jobs, I was placed in the enviable position of being able to view many aspects of air warfare, and thus to retain my

sense of perspective, a sense of which the specialist, riveted to one particular job, is usually deprived. Countless people, no less eager than myself to take part in the war, were condemned to remain idle; others had to stick to their particular job so intensively that they had neither the time nor the means to view the war in a detached way. On the other hand, I was spectator and actor all at once. I could satisfy whatever within me craved for action, whilst I continued to cultivate those pre-war interests that centred in pursuits of a more contemplative character. Instead of repaying my debt to an exceptionally kindly fate by making the very best of whatever opportunities came my way, I withdrew more and more into the shell of introspection and self-centredness. Can I then be surprised that my usefulness decreased; that fate chose for me work that I could only regard as fatuous; and that, finally, I was condemned to almost complete idleness?

I had imagined that if I attended efficiently to my duties on the aerodrome or at H.Q., I had done all that was demanded of me. Yet can the various departments of life be separated from one another, each one of them treated according to different standards? I could not become a really satisfactory member of the R.A.F. if I did not dedicate myself to the service wholly and unconditionally. But there was also the interdependence between my R.A.F. existence and my private life, an interdependence that I had come to disregard completely. Yet life is a unity, and cannot be lived in separate compartments. My private thoughts and emotions, my reading, the tenor of my conversations, my interests in my spare time, all these were reflected in my service life, even though at the time I may not have been aware of that fact. Only externally can private conduct be kept separate from service conduct; spiritually, this is impossible; for the two do not merely overlap but flow into one another, forming a single stream. The quality of my thoughts, the purity or otherwise of my motives, these were unaffected, whether I employed them for private purposes or in the interests of the service.

Thus my true duties were not limited merely to R.A.F. work. The fact that my experience and, possibly, my knowledge were somewhat less limited than those of many of my colleagues, should have been a challenge which imposed moral obligations. Because my philosophy was not circumscribed by the material world and because I believed in the power of the spirit, I should have known that by right conduct and right example I might have exercised a certain helpful influence. Instead, I joined willingly in my colleagues' destructive comments, making myself their spokesman whenever it was a case of expressing criticism, and not seeking to counter-balance their negative tendencies by more positive ones. It was pre-eminently my job to see to it that the negative currents and distorted visions, part and parcel, apparently, of every non-operational H.Q. or mess, should be transformed into something less biased and more constructive. There may have been many instances of official stupidity or injustice of which we were victims, but they could hardly be overcome by our carping and by the manner in which we wasted our time condemning and enlarging upon them. By concentrating on the favourable aspects of a problem we should in all pro-

bability have found it easy to modify a good deal of what was unpleasant. Ought I not to have made it my job to persuade others to act thus? Everyone can learn how to handle telephone switches or a machine-gun, but in view of my true beliefs and, possibly, the special nature of some of my pre-war work, I should have tried to make my contribution in the more spiritual field. One of the reasons why I had been so eager to become an air-gunner in 941 Squadron was that Kellett had said how important he considered the role of an older officer who could be not merely a professional leader of his air-gunners but could help to build up and maintain their morale. I had regarded this as one of the most inspiring jobs imaginable, yet when it didn't materialize I completely overlooked the fact that that task was not limited to work among air-gunners alone. In fact, away from a squadron, there was far greater need for it.

IV

DIARY

Whenever I stand above the loch towards evening and look out upon the surface, clear yet dark and suggesting infinite depth, the image of the R.A.F., grey-blue of colour and bitter and sweet, rises from the waters and the surrounding rock. As in a dream a hundred different pictures are superimposed upon one another. There is Manhill, breakfast in the mess, and the briefing room, and the sweetish smoke from Harry Thwaites's pipe¹; and air-gunnery and crew rooms at Sandfield and Bentley, and the badge with the wing, and a number of voices, none of them very distinct but all unmistakably those of my fellow air-gunners; and the smell of oil; and somewhere I see Corporal Miller's understanding smile; and Kellett flying over Germany (I never flew with him and have never seen him inside a cockpit); and fish and chips being fried inside the Sunderland. Together the hundred different details combine into something far more distinct than any one of them, yet far more difficult to put into words: it is something lovable and youthful, something that suggests human nearness and warmth and cleanliness and a sense of home. Every time the image obliterates the hills and the ever-changing sky above I feel a pang, an unbearable sense of heaviness, as if suddenly I were filled with lead. Shall I ever be able to think of the R.A.F. without feeling like that?

I know it is as right that I should still experience pangs of pain that no medicine on earth can relieve as it was that I should have to give up what I loved most. It is only fair that overnight I should have fallen from my privileged position to one without a single privilege; that a life of security—'while other fellows have to risk their lives, the war will be over and you'll still be sitting safely in Ops. room'—should suddenly have been replaced by one in which nothing is certain; that humiliation should be the prize for a

¹ A few days after the above words were written *The Times* contained the following notice: 'Acting Squadron Leader E. H. T. Thwaites, A.F.C., . . . while serving with his squadron was reported missing in August, and has since been reported as having died of wounds. . . . He was twenty-four years of age.'

step which in everyone's eyes stamps me as either a deserter or a madman. It is right and a blessing that it should be so. For the deeper the fall the brighter the awakening. Though for many weeks the one thing I have feared has been to open my eyes, there is to-day nothing that I want more ardently than to cast aside all pretence and illusion, in order that I may see myself truly for what I am. I do not revel in my 'fall' and in the uncertainty of my position. My future prospects are too anxious, the blank with which I am faced is too unmitigated to allow me the morbid luxury of revelling in pain. But only if I acknowledge uncompromisingly the reality of my position, and of the descent that has led to it, can I hope to establish a sound sense of perspective and find my way back to normal life.

V

DIARY

In spite of everything that has happened, or perhaps because of it, I am anxious to find myself incorporated once again in some branch of our war effort where I can be of use. At the same time I know that I shall neither find another job nor perform satisfactorily any job I might have found so long as I have not completely regained my spiritual vision. I have set out upon this job of daily stocktaking not to excommunicate the past nor to sanctify the future, but to pull down the screen of delusion which prevented me from fully perceiving the present while it was in progress.

Whenever in the past I have allowed myself to be drawn away from those standards of truth that I had come to regard as valid, I have invariably brought some serious crisis upon myself. Those who are striving to build their lives on a foundation of truth, once they depart from truth their vision becomes completely out of focus and their reactions to life become false. Though for me this should have been self-evident, I apparently failed to allow it to guide my attitude during the last few months and succumbed to the domination of alien gods. On many an occasion at Sleethole I dimly felt that I was as much responsible for the unsatisfactory state of affairs as were circumstances; yet I preferred not to face this fact, but rather to brush it aside. Only by deliberate and persistent effort can I now regain my former integrity. So I must be constantly on guard not to slip back into the dangerous little habits that I have acquired in the course of the last year. To-day I know that they express themselves through habits of thinking which are coloured by emotions distorted by unwarranted ambitions, self-centredness occasioned by worry, and last though not least, inaccuracy in the use of words. Adherence to truth in emotions, thoughts, and words is the only path that can lead to peace. But have I not learned in the past that few things demand greater strength than such adherence to truth? I shall have to do a great many things in order to find that strength. To pray must be one of them.

VI

DIARY

Seldom has my worldly horizon been more overcast than it is at present. There are moments when I feel greatly tempted to cross the moat of my

seclusion and rush to London. What for? To secure some material foundation for the future and, perhaps, to escape once again from myself. It is at such moments of temptation that prayer affords me the only reliable guidance. From its silence emerges the question: how can I hope to find material security so long as I haven't succeeded in establishing spiritual security? And what would be the value of even the most congenial job in London if I were unable to base it on secure spiritual foundations? Do I wish to see the experience of the last few months repeated?

No, I must sit out the grey remainder of this evening, and withdraw ever more deeply into self-questioning, and hope thereby to find my bearings anew. For I cannot yet claim to be strong enough to follow the few glimpses of truth with a completely unfaltering step. Like the physical body the spiritual takes a long time to recuperate after sickness.

During the last few months, whenever I was troubled by insomnia, or felt on edge and realized with alarm that the smallest emotional shock was liable to throw me off my balance, I imagined that it was my physical body that was ailing. Yet what else was it but the spirit that was sick?

My only prayer is that God may grant me the strength to follow no other direction than that indicated by my faith. If I can make of faith the central force in my life, things both spiritual and material will inevitably work out for the best, irrespective of how long this forlorn period may last. All I ask of Him, therefore, is the strength to accept unhesitatingly whatever He may have in store for me.

VII

DIARY

I have lately been brooding so much upon my faith that for the last few days I have felt the need to divorce myself from my own problems. So when the owner of my hotel asked me to join him and his wife this morning on their drive to M., some twenty miles away, where they were to attend a special service held by the Bishop of L., I accepted their invitation, even though the prospect of going among people attracted me but little. But having once wrenched myself out of my isolation, I was glad to forget my own self and, if only for the brief hour of the service, to subordinate it completely in common worship.

I was therefore distressed when—not for the first time—I experienced how difficult it was to give of one's best in a church, and to enter into that intimate communion with the Divine which is not infrequently the fruit of solitary prayer. There was the bustle of late-comers; the sneezing and coughing; the machine-like monotony of the prayers; the overloading of the service with non-essentials; the getting up and sitting down, the standing and the kneeling—in short, all the externals which seemed to play so disproportionately big a part and which make it, at any rate for me, difficult to concentrate on what I consider the chief purpose of all worship: the silent entry into one's innermost self and the joyous dedication of that self upon the wave of common adoration to God. No doubt my inability to achieve this was my own fault. Others possibly experienced no difficulty in worshipping

even while they attended to the ecclesiastical gymnastics to which Jesus never referred with a single word in the testament that He left for us. *What He said to Peter, who was to build the Church visible, was, 'Guard my sheep', not 'Lose yourself, and those who follow you, in ceremonies; overload my message with ritual the meaning of which is beyond my sheep's comprehension; clothe my simple word in such elaborate garments that it is stifled in them'. I have not yet attained the perfect self-control that might enable me to enter truly into myself whilst simultaneously paying attention to the right reactions of my senses and the prescribed actions of my limbs. I am not a theologian, and it is not for me to say whether the Mass which, no doubt, is action, should be incessant action in the physical sense as well as in the spiritual. All I know is that for me the Christianity of silent communion with the Lord, the religion of the monk and the mystic, who seeks his God in solitary wrestling, is nearer to the example of the Master than is that of pomp and ceremony in which the congregation involuntarily becomes the audience of a play. The congregation may, and indeed does, take part in the play, but so did the crowd watching Euripides and Sophocles in the Amphitheatre, or worshipping at the shrine of Bacchus. Yet is not the difference between Christianity and the glorious paganism of Hellas the fact that its noblest vehicle is not the senses but the spirit and nothing but the spirit? That it implies not the identification with phenomena but the comprehension of them in the spirit? That its gods are the invisible ones of Plato rather than the visible ones strutting on high cothurni over the Athenian stage? That its kingdom is not of earth but of heaven?*

Half through the service, the white-haired bishop mounted the pulpit. His features were so demurely benign that I looked forward to his sermon with genuine eagerness. His subject was sin, and in my mood of the moment no other subject could have interested me more profoundly. But for thirty minutes the bishop persisted in repeating all the half-truths about sin which a theological refusal to acknowledge the realities and complexities of life is responsible for, and which have probably done more to empty the churches than any other single factor. I had come to church very humble of heart, and more willing than ever to accept the Church's every word. I had come thirsting for the wine of a new life and the balsam of a new hope, but after I had listened to the sermon for several minutes, no amount of devotion and goodwill on my part could enable me to accept the preacher's words in the requisite spirit of humility. Probably there were not many people in church as acutely conscious of their shortcomings as I was at the moment. Nevertheless I utterly refused to regard myself as the kind of sinner that the preacher was making every one of us out to be. He spoke of me—for he addressed us all and sundry as identical sinners—as though I revelled in sinning and were an addict to it as I might be addicted to drink. He spoke of me as though I deliberately went out of my way to sin, and took a wicked pleasure in doing so.

Sin is something far too complex to be dismissed with a few doctrinal formulae and oratorical clichés. I sin because at the moment of sinning I am

not aware of doing so; because I am too weak to resist temptation; because I too easily forget my principles and ideals; because my upbringing and my religious education have not equipped me with a sufficiently acute sense of discrimination between what is real sin and what mere transgression against fashion, convention, or habit; I sin because I forget that the path of virtue is in the end a more efficacious one than its opposite; I sin because I am lazy, complacent, and self-indulgent. But, when all is said, I am a true sinner only when I deliberately act in a manner revealed to me by my conscience as wrong.

But the bishop spoke of none of these things. All he did was to harangue us. Not with a single word did he show us what sin really was, by what means we might learn to recognize and so overcome it. I had gone to church to be helped, so that eventually I might possibly help others. I had gone to church to become more tolerant, kindly, and loving. I had gone to church to feel myself at one with my fellow men and to experience with them the joy of common worship. But I had not gone to church to be talked down to as though I were a naughty boy deliberately pulling out a fly's wings and throwing ink over his sister's new dress. And I had not gone to church to be confronted with the image of a god who was nothing but a vindictive, strait-laced, intolerant, possessive, and altogether terrifying Victorian parent. The God whom I worshipped had none of these attributes. He understood everything, and with His understanding broadened my own narrow horizon; He was forgiving, and with His forgiveness strengthened my determination not to offend against Him; He was loving, and with His love increased my longing for Him.

Fortunately even the sermon at last came to an end, and a hymn was sung by the church choir. The voices of the baritones rustled through the dark nave like autumn winds in a beechwood; and the soprano of the boys rose crystalline clear, to trickle down gradually in silver rivulets of sound. When the glory of the organ engulfed them all, every jarring note that earlier in the morning had been struck in the pulpit was forgotten. But it was only during the last five minutes of silent prayer that the soul could forget all that was part of the stony ground below and rise untrammelled towards the sanctified roof to rest awhile on the wings of a thousand fellow souls.

VIII

DIARY

Every day I seem to discover yet another little particle of the truth that I have been trying to run away from for the last few months. None of them is particularly startling, none of them is really new to me. But as they reveal themselves to me gradually day by day, each one of them seems to give me an added measure of strength or, I should perhaps say, to remove some of the fear that for weeks past has been my inseparable companion.

How puny and laughable those fears now seem from which I used to suffer before going up in an aircraft or when expecting that we might come across German aeroplanes. What unambiguous and innocent fears they were! There is nothing equally straightforward about my fears of the last

few weeks. They do not arise from the uncertainties of my situation or from the bleakness of my prospects, even though both of these may add fuel to them. What set the true fire of fear alight was the moment when for the first time I realized the full distance that I had travelled away from my faith and thus recognized the full measure of my weakness. For what prospects can the future hold for me if I can give up so easily what I know to be the sole source of my existence? What sense is there in living if the sense behind it no longer exists? There can be neither purpose nor strength in a life nourished on an ersatz diet changed each day according to circumstances. It is this complete senselessness—the recognition of living in a spiritual vacuum—that has filled me with fear. Only gradually am I learning to overcome it.

No man in my present position could possibly avoid giving thought to his purely material difficulties. Irrespective of how the solution of our difficulties may depend upon the decisions of others, it is we ourselves who determine it to a great extent. For others are the instruments of the same spiritual agency whose decisions are swayed by our own conduct. I may call the particular 'department' of that agency which concerns itself with my life, my individual fate; it is nevertheless inextricably intertwined with the fates of those whose decisions have the power to affect my life. If for some reason fate is favourably disposed towards me—and usually such benevolence on her part is nothing but an expression of divine mercy—she will bring about a crisis in my life sufficiently grave to awaken me and hence will compel me to make the efforts that may yet turn the solution in my favour. Yet though such efforts are an essential condition to secure the co-operation of fate, in themselves they have no power to sway the scales. This lies entirely in higher hands. But the determining motive behind my efforts must on no account be to secure a bargain with God. It must be an honest desire to exchange my misguided way of life for a better one. In acting in accordance with such a desire, I shall probably find it difficult to dissociate myself completely from the ulterior motive, which cannot be excluded from the deliberations of my mind. Yet if my efforts are guided by the wish to improve my external conditions, their spiritually creative faculties will have lost their power. What may have seemed to be an increased truthfulness in my conduct will merely be a subtle form of hypocrisy.

IX

DIARY

Always, or nearly always, we are our own gravediggers. How easily we forget that while our victories are due to divine mercy, our defeats come from seeds sown by ourselves. Though I may not have admitted to myself that it was so, I have known this truth for many a year and especially during my days at Sleethole. I knew it at Oldfort, and I knew it during the last few months, even though I preferred to wrap myself round with the haze of a dream, as though any dream could last for ever.

There is one question to which I still seem unable to find an answer. Why

was I torn away from the community and the work of air-gunners, after the days at Manhill probably the happiest period in my entire life? However lamentable my standards may have been during my wanderings through the other avenues of the R.A.F., as an air-gunner I seemed to have approximated to my ideals of conduct more than ever before. For once I had succeeded in forgetting self and in working for something bigger. As far as I can judge, my only vanity during those days was that of basking in the glory that went with the A.-G. wing on my tunic. Why then should I have been deprived of the legitimate prize?

Yet does not my very question contain the seed of the answer? The challenge implied in it is in itself an admission of conceit. Not everything we do and give and receive is the result of our own will. Surely there are powers that, either compelled by ourselves to act as they do, or acting of their own volition and for reasons hidden from us, nevertheless are inexorable. Whatever this or that Air Marshal or minor clerk may have decided on my behalf was only a fragment of an inevitable pattern.

I have no right to accuse anyone for the one major puzzle in my R.A.F. career, but the duty to exonerate those who unwittingly may have been the cause of it. Though I had volunteered with boundless enthusiasm, I had been called into the service not to become an air-gunner. The purpose of my appointment was liaison work. By deliberately dissociating myself from it—however justified such a step may have been—I placed those responsible for my presence in the R.A.F. in a difficult position. To men who had shown me nothing but kindness, I had suddenly become a nuisance. Not when I first joined up was I the white elephant that I had imagined myself to be, but only when I set out to satisfy ambitions that were of my own making.

X

DIARY

I should have hesitated to commit even to these intimate pages the experience that I had to-day if, for all its mystery, it did not seem to me the crowning of less articulate 'visions'. I have no explanation to offer for it even to myself. Though my solitary days are conducive to attempts to penetrate behind the curtain that separates phenomena from their causes, I must be content to narrate to-day's experience just as it was, without trying to find the why and the wherefore.

Despite all my efforts to view life solely in spiritual terms, yesterday I seemed to have reached the lowest ebb of bewilderment. Never during the preceding weeks had my future looked more uncertain and darker to me; never had the feeling that I was taking no part whatever in our war effort been more acute; never had I appeared to myself more painfully as a 'deserter'. There seemed to exist absolutely nothing for me beyond the moors and woods, the slate-coloured sheet of water below, the relentless clouds in the sky. Where was I to find that minimum of understanding for which the human being craves as much as he does for air? The only refuge to turn to was God, who knows everything, understands everything, for-

gives everything. And has not He alone the power to help, a power beyond that of all Air Marshals of this earth? Must He not help? 'The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit' I had read somewhere, never forgetting these words. 'A broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise.'

Throughout the whole week my thoughts had turned more and more towards Him, and by to-day there was scarcely a moment when they were not focused upon Him. My prayers finally resolved themselves into the one wish to find in the prevailing darkness the image of Christ. I know neither how long I prayed in that particular manner nor whether I articulated my wish in any special words. I only know that this wish became as ardent as if the whole of my life depended upon the answer to it. Gradually I could discern the outlines of a cross. . . .

Then, at last, I saw the Face. When it eventually disappeared I felt, while physically weary, more elated and confident than I had done for months. . . .

It was less than half an hour after my experience that the mail, which is delivered here only once a day and not until the afternoon, arrived. There was only one letter for me. It came from the south of England and the writer was unknown to me. The letter ended with the following words: 'I so trust that you have great inner peace. I have prayed and do pray for you. God bless you and help you and unveil to you His Son our Saviour.'

Perhaps I am not quite so alone as I had imagined myself to be.

XI

DIARY

Once again I recognize that when you have suffered a great shock and, in consequence, discarded most of the interests that normally preoccupy you, your spiritual sensibility may be increased far beyond the ordinary. Is it then surprising that your religious life should come more fully into its own?

Non-believers claim that this interdependence between sorrow and religion is in itself a proof of the unreality of religious life. Such life is nothing but escapism, they say, an ersatz article which in a life that proceeds happily is not needed. Yet even when happy, the religious-minded do not feel divorced from God. They may neglect to cultivate their relationship with Him for long periods, yet religion will not cease to provide them with the only philosophy and morality which they can accept as valid. The man who is sensitive to beauty may be able to subsist for longer or shorter periods without any intercourse with beauty; but once beauty re-enters his life, he realizes that without it he has merely been vegetating, and that what was best in him was condemned to uneasy slumber.

Under normal conditions, most of us live by habit, mechanically, and are thus not unduly preoccupied with the religious life, for such a life implies the very opposite of any sort of automatism. Life is made 'easy' by becoming mechanical, so that we are saved from exertion or thought, and called upon for no great spiritual effort. In his innate laziness the human animal

naturally shrinks from what may appear undue effort. That is why he prefers to live by routine and convention rather than to be fully aware of himself and his actions. To cultivate the life of the spirit—and is not this the supreme province of religion?—demands intense effort. Unless conditions compel us to do otherwise, we prefer to employ our energies merely for the attainment of the nearest practical aims and choose for this purpose the method that necessitates the minimum of spiritual exertion, which means, chiefly, that of automatic and mechanical activity. However deplorable it may be that we should mobilize our religious resources only when there is nothing else left for us to do, the whole tenor of modern life makes this almost inevitable. The life of the spirit implies, among other things, contemplation, temporary withdrawal from the world, with a corresponding loosening of all material links. Modern existence is not propitious for any of these. It would seem, however, that the very concentration which the exercise of our religious faculties demands is an indication of its value. Can anything worth while be achieved without special exertion?

XII

DIARY

It is several years since I first recognized that self-fulfilment could mean only one thing for me, namely action in accordance with what an inner sense makes me regard as something akin to the will of God. But later a miscellany of interests and occupations, much work and unexpected success, crowded my life, and what I had imagined to be an ever-active fountain gradually dried up into a theoretical system, preached to others but of decreasing influence upon my own conduct.

In the course of the last year I have allowed myself increasingly to forget what my most precious possession was. First of all, there was the novelty of adventure; then the exhilaration of new work and new human associations; then the weight of ambitions artificially inflated and of conflicts and difficulties which I exaggerated. I imagined that I was entitled to more important or more congenial work than came my way and, finally, I felt disheartened as though the nature of my job depended solely upon the decisions of my superiors. Even if my expectations had been fulfilled, what guarantee was there that soon afterwards I should not have been hankering for more? After the first few months in the R.A.F. I allowed my brief service past to influence my ambitions for the future, forgetting that fulfilment exists only in the present. Instead of remembering what my true mission in the R.A.F. might have been, I had begun to cling to the trimmings, and to view them not as a means to an end but as an end in themselves. Whenever in the past I have identified myself too much with something that was merely a stepping-stone and not a final aim—a human relationship, a certain type of work, a particular home—I have invariably lost it. Had I regarded all the outcroppings of the Air Force and the kudos which I had imagined these would earn for me with complete detachment, my link with the service would never have broken, and my affection for it might have been creative instead of merely sentimental. In my perversity, I failed to perceive that the idols towards

which I had been raising my eyes were shams of no value, which ought to be treated with indifference. To-day I know that no position in the world can give a fraction of that sense of inner security and stability that flows from my relationship with God. In comparison with that what can it matter whether I am praised or blamed?

I must be satisfied to accomplish whatever work is given to me without worrying about results, for, in the final instance, these depend upon higher decision. Having cast off the old garment, let me admit gratefully that the new one, however unpretentious, is far better, if worn in the right spirit. I must train my heart to become as hard as flint, yet if service is truly my aim, I must also allow it to be as soft as wax. I must have the strength of unflinching honesty, for only then will the road ahead of me be a straight one. And as weakness breeds new weakness, so the new strength may become the seed of even greater strength. I must learn that I myself, rather than circumstances, am the master of my life. If I am true and listen to my conscience as my only arbiter, God can speak through me. The impossible is inherent within myself; what comes from God is not only possible but without limit. The commonplace is as much part of it as is the miracle.

Later

I have just been re-reading what I wrote this morning and I realize that much of it sounds like a pompous sermon. Yet my words express exactly my true beliefs. However imperfect my knowledge may be, I have lived the truth behind it, and more than once.

XIII

DIARY

Though I rejoice in my newly found faith, I must shamefully admit that I do not always find it easy to keep the flame alight. The man graced with a large measure of divine mercy lives perpetually in the state of awareness that comes from a living faith. Those of us whose imperfections condemn us over and over again to spiritual inertia can keep that state only by persistent watchfulness. And by prayer.

XIV

DIARY

My material future is to-day as uncertain as it was a month, a fortnight, or a week ago. I cannot afford to stay here much longer and must move on somewhere else. Everyone I have written to offering my services has replied that I had better write to someone else, or said that I was a few days too late, or suggested that I might write again in a month's time. Yet none of these circumstances worries me unduly. I know that once I have completely recovered the strength to live by my faith in accordance with what I consider to be true, the material difficulties will smooth themselves out.

Only a few weeks separate me from that morning in the mess library when my response to the psalmist's words was nothing but incomprehension.

To-day I can only marvel at such dullness of the mind. For have I not wrested true gladness from the days of affliction? And could I have done so had God not sent the affliction, out of which alone the gladness could be generated? 'Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us,' the psalmist cried, 'and the years wherein we have seen evil.' Far be it from me to generalize and claim that the gateway to gladness must invariably lead through a descent into evil, but in his wisdom the psalmist knew that evil and affliction are amongst man's most faithful companions. He also knew that, with God's blessing, they need not remain for ever a dark underworld from which there is no escape, but become a bridge that leads to gladness.

XV

DIARY

Upon going through the pages of this diary for the last year, I find how frequently I have referred to conditions and events that have appeared to me as though they were part of a dream. There were beautiful dreams—Manhill, air-gunnery, comradeship; there were harrowing dreams—Sleet-hole, that summer morning in London at the Air Ministry, the Ops. room, the flashes of bursting bombs and the black clouds of burning oil in the harbour of N. The whole life of appearance can be a dream, even though it need not always be so. The only experience that cannot be a dream but is reality, is the spirit's awareness that leads to a recognition of God and His will.

No longer do I feel the need to speak in terms of dreams. Dreams cannot be woven except from the threads in which the physical world tries to enmesh us. What is beyond that world, what speaks with the voice of the spirit, comes from the very heart of existence, is irrefutable, immortal, above all conflict, free from duality, very essence of truth. For me, the days of dream are over. They belong to the past, even though they may come back in future nights. For only dreams reach out to yesterday and to-morrow. Truth can exist only in the present. There is no awareness except within the brief moment, but truth is eternal, and in the brief instant of awareness we are linked to eternity. Thus in the rapture of the present moment alone can we experience the beat of timelessness, and if in the flash of such awareness we recognize God or the meaning of His will, then, and then alone, do we enter the gates of immortality.

XVI

DIARY

Before departing from the shores of this loch, let me recall once again those glimpses of truth that during recent weeks have strengthened me and that, if God will, may do so again if at some future time distorting dreams lead me astray:

If my plans are devised merely by my intellect or by my desires, I must not cling to them once fate has decided unequivocally against them. What

seems right to myself may quite easily be alien to the pattern of my life of which I am never the sole designer.

However dark my hour, I must remember that God knows my troubles and my needs. If I do not waver in my trust in Him, He will not burden me with a load too heavy for me to carry. For my own sake He must test my faith, but He has no desire to crush me. Let me never forget the wise words of Julian of Norwich: 'God said not, "Thou shalt not be tempted, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be afflicted," but He said, "Thou shalt not be overcome."'

If my affliction has given me greater spiritual awareness, let me do all in my power to keep that awareness alive. I can do so by prayer and meditation and, above all, by trying continually to keep God in my thoughts. But my meditations must not become wishful dreams or states of oblivion, nor my prayers, mechanical repetitions. Every new morning may disclose to me a new aspect of my troubles. So I must focus my attention on it and give new colour and new vigour to prayers that otherwise may easily become sterile.

Let me place my faith in God's hands each day anew. One meal, however substantial, will not sustain my body for long. The batteries charged with the spiritual current generated by prayer are not of unlimited capacity. God Himself cannot make of me a saint or solve all my problems between sunrise and sunset. I can ask Him for no more than to provide me with the strength to do His will for one single day. Next day I must ask for His help again. In a rare instance He may deem it right to perform a miracle and solve my troubles in one single sweep. But neither my spiritual nor my material life can be built upon the foundations of a miracle. Both the spirit and the body are subject to the laws of daily growth and daily decay, of daily giving and daily receiving, of daily effort and daily grace.

I must learn to regard God as the only effective 'partner' in all my enterprises, and rely upon no-one else's help as much as on His. Though I shall have to give heed to the demands of reason and circumstances, never must I forget that God alone makes the final decision.

If I feel that my faith is waning, I shall have to train myself, almost hypnotize myself, to believe that God will not fail me. To bear fruit the gift of faith, like all gifts, requires self-discipline and deliberate cultivation. But in days of calm, I must not worry overmuch as to whether in times of crisis my faith will prove adequate. The weight of my troubles and the white heat of my ardour will provide all the fuel necessary to keep my faith aflame.

Let me cultivate the courage to be indifferent to success and failure alike. But my indifference must not deteriorate into a negative disinterestedness. It

must result from a positive acknowledgement of the ephemeral character of either success or failure. I must accept any humiliation or disgrace, poverty, loneliness, even imprisonment, with equanimity. Neither prison nor palace can either exalt or tarnish what is my innermost self. What the world regards as humiliation may easily be an act of divine grace.

When the blow of fate is so heavy that I imagine it must crush me, let me remember that throughout the ages men greater and wiser than I have in moments of anguish placed their fate in God's hands and emerged victorious. Their accumulated belief in and experience of God's essential goodness will not suddenly be proved false by my troubles.

The more ardent and humble my faith, the wider I open doors for God to enter, and the easier I make it for Him to assist me.

As a Christian, in my personal applications I shall inevitably address myself particularly to Jesus Christ. Every individual Christian is held to Him by the most intimate and the most mysterious of all the links that can exist between man and God. Within the hierarchy of the spiritual world, it is He who speaks for the sinful and the afflicted.

Finally, I must find a way to separate my personal supplications from impersonal, or rather, a-personal worship. The final aim of all the longings of the human spirit is the selfless adoration of God. He may be our partner and chief adviser in our personal troubles, but He is more than that. Have we a right to call upon Him merely for our own ends, however noble these may be? Though He does not depend upon the offerings of our worship, the sense of justice implied by our relationship to Him, and by our position in a universe governed by a perfect sense of balance, demand that we should worship Him out of the consciousness of our debt, that we should not merely receive but also give. Let me not deceive myself into thinking that I can reach the stage essential for pure adoration and selfless worship so long as I am worried by personal troubles. So long as such troubles beset me, they will be the stepping-stone from which I shall try to reach God. True adoration of God, however, must be free from all the dross of self-centredness. Only after we have succeeded in reaching the stage at which God really becomes more important to us than ourselves will our worship be that pure sacrifice which alone is a genuine offering to God.


XVII

DIARY

Have decided to leave to-morrow for London. Though London appears to be in the throes of German savagery and suffers nightly from vicious bombing, it is the obvious place for me, if only so that I may secure some war work. I might return to my pre-war occupation and retire to the country, but I do not feel that at a time when the war seems to be starting in earnest I have either the desire or the right to remain an outsider.

Once again, there is a gale outside, and in the fading light I can distinguish the waves of the narrow loch beating against the rock as if with the might of the whole ocean. The wind and the clouds come bowling from the east, wrestling with the waters in battle. Though only a few weeks ago I hated those tempestuous days with cruelty in the air, terror in the waters, and unknown malice lurking in each cranny of the stone, to-day I find the weather invigorating and, for once, I recognize that there is comfort and strength and health in a great wind. The frantic clouds carry silver in their torn folds and the trees on the opposite hill are no longer red-topped and crested in gold, as they were only an hour ago, but black and quivering under the leash of the wind. And yet, I repeat, it is a good wind. Nothing stands between it and heaven; there is nothing of man-made worry and pettiness about it. It means life and movement, and no spirit, however misguided or forlorn, could remain stagnant in it. Perhaps I no longer see the enemy in it, because to-day I know that all life must be battle, all life is journeying. Is not the wind both?

So for once, departure's eve must not be weakened by mawkish regrets. Let it be rich with the blood that spouts from all new birth. Let the beginning sparkle with the gold that the past has thrown up; and to-morrow's path shall be illumined with the light of yesterday. No longer shall a one-eyed peacock and a proud knight's empty armour bid me a last farewell. No longer shall the psalmist cry in vain. For gladness rises from affliction, and from defeat—victory. And a humble new wing can be born.



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